Northampton Echoes

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/2705330.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (TV 2012)
Relationship:	April O'Neil/Raphael (TMNT)
Characters:	Raphael (TMNT), April O'Neil
Additional Tags:	Raphril - Freeform, Emotional Hurt/Comfort
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2014-12-02 Updated: 2023-12-17 Words: 74,837 Chapters: 19/?

Northampton Echoes

by Gladrial

Summary

April is trying to cope with loss and finds a kindred spirit in an unexpected place. (RaphaelxApril)

Notes

Notes: This takes place following the end of season two and spans into season 3. Point of view will change between April and Raphael depending on the segment. The first chapter of this story was originally intended and posted as a one-shot under another title, but I've since been inspired to open it up into something much more ambitious. A big thanks to princessebee for her support and encouragement. I absolutely guarantee I would not have gotten involved as deeply in this fandom without her, much less be writing for it.

Beta: princessebee

Credit (in regards to chapter 1): Much as I adore setoangel01's stuff, I did not consciously have her piece "Raphril Stars" in mind when writing this chapter, but would be hard pressed to believe it wasn't used subconsciously even if the image is for the 2014 movie. So I'm going to give credit, if for no other reason than her stuff is awesome and you should totally check out her deviantart page.

Chapter 1

April had been left to take care of the dishes alone again. Nevermind that she had just been tasked with feeding everyone. Not that anyone had come right out and asked her to. She basically had taken it upon herself. Otherwise, it seemed they all had agreed to survive on a diet of salty snacks and sugary cereal. They probably wouldn't mind living in a pigsty either, for that matter.

Leo wouldn't stand for this, she thought gruffly, then instantly wished her mind hadn't taken her automatically to such a painful place. She pushed the thought aside quickly, returning back to the matter at hand.

Still, it would have been nice if someone had offered to help with the clean-up. To make matters worse, another round of bickering had begun in the living room, with voices getting louder by the second. She didn't know what had started it off this time, but was sure it was something infantile as per usual. Familiar with this build up to the inevitable rough housing and not wanting the accompanying headache, she decided to stop midway through her chore, dried her hands, and headed out the side door.

The night's symphony of crickets was a soothing reprise from the turmoil inside, until it was broken by a crashing sound from within accompanied by the muffled voice of someone yelling Mikey's name. She couldn't discern who from outside but it didn't take much imagination to guess.

"Raph," she muttered to herself with a sigh, looking heavenward as if help would come from above. Stuffing her hands in her pockets, she glumly set off further from the house in search of a brief respite.

The only light came from the windows on the lower floor of the house, but the moon was full and bright in the sky overhead. She rounded the barn and was surprised to find that she wasn't the only one wandering around in the dark that night.

In the middle of the empty field before her sat Raphael staring up into the sky. She considered whether or not to announce herself. More than likely he was seeking solitude, as she had been. She'd been doing that a lot lately, she realized, though, at the moment, she wasn't sure why. All it seemed to accomplish was allowing herself to sink further into melancholy thoughts. After a brief deliberation, she silently approached him.

"Hey," she called out before reaching him, giving him the opportunity to let her know if he wanted to be alone.

He turned, surprised to see her at first, but remained seated in the grass. "Huh," he grunted. "Didn't hear you coming."

"Ninja," she commented brightly.

"Yeah, right," he chuckled.

"The fellas are having it out again. Thought you were in there with them," she confessed.

"Who me?" he smirked. "I would never."

"Right, right. I forgot about your gentle disposition," she commented sarcastically and was awarded a laugh. Their banter over, an awkward moment of silence followed. "Mind if I join you?" she finally asked.

"It's a free country," he answered with a shrug.

She sat on the grass next to him and followed his gaze upward; the two of them sat silently for a time. "So you come out here often?" she asked.

"Isn't that a pick-up line?" he offered dryly, still staring upward. "If you really want to hear the guys have it out, call Casey and Don outside and do that again."

She laughed clear and loud unexpectedly to the both of them, to the point that he jumped a little in surprise. The crickets momentarily quieted as she nearly fell over in laughter, before eventually getting ahold of herself. "Thanks," she giggled. "I needed that."

"That's me," he quipped. "A regular a stand-up comedian."

"But you know what I meant," she said. "Sitting in an open field in the middle of the night… It's just not what I would expect is all."

"It's a clear night," he pointed out, as though that were explanation enough.

It was at that, she agreed. The sky was deep and dark, sprinkled with thousands of glimmering stars.

"We don't get to see many stars in the city," she said in understanding. "I never thought about it much to be honest."

"Don't suppose you would," he snarked, but his heart didn't seem into it and she decided to let it go.

"It's the light pollution, you know. In the city-"

"Please don't," he begged, closing his eyes tightly in exasperation. "Don't do the Donnie thing. Not everything needs a fucking explanation."

"Sorry," she offered simply, immediately wondering why she had done so in the first place. It occurred to her that since she had met the turtles, quiet moments like these were few and far between, making them feel out of place and so perhaps she felt the need to fill them with chatter.

"Do you want me to go?" she asked genuinely.

"No," he answered quickly, still looking skyward. "If I'm being an asshole, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to be. I'm-"

April watched as his eyes gleamed and she looked up to catch a shooting star cross the sky in front of them.

She smiled. "You've never seen one before."

"No," he breathed.

"Well, you know what you have to do, right?" she began.

"Do?" He finally pried his eyes from the sky to look at her with confusion.

"Yes," she continued. "If you see a shooting star, you have to make a wish. Especially if it's your first one. That's extra special."

"Don't be stupid," he scoffed at her instantly, as she had more than expected.

"You're right. It is stupid. Would you like me to *explain* why?" she asked smugly. "A shooting star is actually-"

"Alright! Alright!" he relented. "You win!"

April smiled triumphantly. "First you have to close your eyes," she instructed.

He sighed heavily, but did as he was told. But not without muttering, "This is dumb."

"Yes, we've been over that already," April reminded him. "Now you just make a wish."

He opened one eye and regarded her. "If I have to do this, you do to," he demanded.

"Fair enough," April agreed and followed suit by closing her eyes as well.

After some time, April leaned over toward him covertly and whispered, "What'd you wish for?"

"Oh no," he refused. "Doesn't that jinx it or something?"

She searched his face, even though he was still looking upward, and found herself reaching for his hand, squeezing it gently. "Leo's going to be okay, Raph."

Surprised by the touch at first, but accepting of it, he squeezed her hand back. "Yeah. Yeah, I know," he answered, but the sound of his voice betrayed him.

She wanted to convince him that it was true. That the universe had dealt them a crappy hand and it was bound to start being dealt in their favor soon. That, on top of everything, there's no way karma would take Leo from them too. But none of that was very practical, she knew, and would do little to change Raphael's state of mind.

So, instead, she silently returned to star-gazing in silence. A silence that was a lot less awkward than before. Before long, another star streamed across the sky.

"Want to try for round two?" she asked.

He nodded in agreement. "Couldn't hurt."

Chapter 2

Originally, April had associated the kitchen with bitter thoughts, upon learning that, by some silent agreement she hadn't been privy to, its chores had been assigned to her. Oh sure, the others would venture in if they were after a snack or a drink, but if she entered the room, they quickly made themselves scarce as though they feared she'd ask them to join in.

It didn't take long, however, for the room to become a sanctuary of sorts, seeing as she'd nearly be guaranteed to find herself alone in it. A sanctuary she desperately needed.

That evening she'd gone around the living area, collecting random dishes strewn about during the day, wet rag in hand to mop up the inevitable sticky spots left over from Mikey's pet while he sat transfixed to the television. She admonished him for the umpteenth time that Ice Cream Kitty was his responsibility, and for the umpteenth time, he cheerfully apologized. She sighed as she entered the kitchen with a pile of dirty dishes, knowing full well they'd have the conversation again tomorrow.

Crossing into the threshold of her new retreat, she exhaled deeply and finally allowed the smile she'd forced herself to wear all day to fade. It was easier, she had found, to act cheerful since they had arrived at her family's farm house. Doing otherwise led to uncomfortable confrontations. Ones she had since decided to avoid if at all possible.

It had started with Donnie. Of course, it had started with Donnie. Seeing her upset was just something he couldn't tolerate. She knew, really knew, it was because he cared for her deeply. Unfortunately, being who he was, that meant he had to *fix* the problem. She was sad, ergo broken, and so needed to be fixed. The biggest obstacle to his success being, there was nothing he could do. She wasn't a broken radiator or a toaster on the blitz or the motley pieces of a shattered Kraang bot. There was nothing he, or anyone, could do to reclaim their home, help Leo, bring back Splinter…or her father. Her father for the *third* time…

But Donnie talked a big game. Made all sorts of promises. Rambled on about all kinds of possible solutions. And, to be fair, he normally came through on those promises. After all, he had said he'd restore her father after his mutation and he, against all odds, had managed to do so. What irked her was the fact that he had made this vow without knowing for sure whether or not he could deliver. And, just like now, he did so in order to fix her mental state. As though experiencing any sort of negative emotion wasn't allowed.

April scrubbed the dish in her hand harder than necessary out of frustration.

All she wanted to do was feel miserable. Wasn't there plenty of cause for that in their lives right now? And as much as Donnie had yearned for any physical interaction between the two of them, he missed probably the best opportunity in his life because all she wanted to do was cry and be held. She would have let him be that person, if he'd allowed it.

She chuckled sadly to herself at the irony of it all.

Instead, he went on and on trying to improve her attitude while she stared at him, dumbfounded at his optimism. Honestly, she understood this was his way of coping. There was a situation and the situation should be resolved, and hell if he wasn't going to be the one to figure out how. But if she could see that this is what he needed, why couldn't he see what she needed? Her lack of response must have disturbed him because he had eventually stopped in the middle of his ramblings, looked at her seriously and said, "April, it's going to be okay. I promise."

After her continued silence didn't seem to clue him in, it became very clear the only thing she could do to make it all end. So she put on the most genuine smile she could muster and agreed with him that yes, everything was going to be just fine.

But at least he was more tolerable than Casey, she recalled, placing another plate in the drying rack.

Casey's coping mechanism was by far the most infuriating. He had decided to live in a constant state of denial. The one time she saw him crack at all was when they were pulling out of New York. After that, it was his usual level of buffoonery. She had tried to talk to him once or twice about his family. To his credit, she'd notice him briefly contemplate the possibility of opening up to her when she had done so, but he clearly didn't know how to handle such a heavy conversation and so would opt to change the subject instead. Hell, if anything he seemed to focus on the positive, constantly going on about how he didn't have to worry about school anymore.

Logically, she knew she had no right to tell him how to deal with sorrow, so she bore it best she could. Unfortunately, things came to a head one day on a trip to the grocery store, the two of them alone in the van. She had been particularly quiet on the way there, despite his best efforts to engage her in conversation.

"What's eating you, Red?" he finally asked.

She turned from her contemplative gaze out the window and gave him an incredulous glare. "What's eating me?" she returned. "Do I honestly have to list it out for you? Y'know, sometimes I think you might as well be living on another planet as oblivious as you come off sometimes."

He screwed his face into a grimace. "I ain't stupid, Red. So I'm not acting like it's the end of the world. Is that what you want? Is acting miserable going to get us anywhere?"

"Well, acting like everything is peachy isn't getting us anywhere either," she retorted, sharply.

They had spent the remainder of the trip in silence, until pulling up to the store. She had expected it to continue, after stepping out of the van, but instead found herself face to face with him. Wordlessly, he had pulled her into an embrace and she hadn't resisted. In fact, she thought for a moment that maybe she had him all wrong. Maybe he did understand. But, just as she was about to allow herself to break down, she heard him say, "It's going to be okay, Red. You'll see." And he pulled back, searching her face expectantly and she gave him what he wanted and smiled as brightly as she could manage.

But it wasn't until she had a facedown with Mikey did she realize she really had a problem. She nearly dropped the glass she was polishing, recalling her gut reaction that day. How cruel and uncharacteristic it was of her and once again uttered a quiet thank you that he had been oblivious to it.

Despite his faults, Mikey had an understanding about people and what they needed on an instinctual level, so she felt more comfortable putting her guard down around him than anyone else. He kept a cheery demeanor but didn't seem inclined to force it upon her. So despite his unrelenting perkiness, she had been ironically preferring his company these days.

One night, she had found a quiet moment of solitude in front of the fireplace after everyone else had gone to bed. She watched the flames hypnotically, feeling devoid of all emotion and wondering if that was a step in the right or wrong direction, when she heard someone descending the stairs. She braced herself for whatever interaction was about to be forced upon her and was relieved to see it was Mikey.

He sat next to her knowingly with a warm smile that she found impossible not to genuinely return, despite her mood. Leaning her head on his shoulder, she was somewhat content for what felt like the first time in a long time, to have someone there that would allow her just to be. But then he had to speak.

"I've been worried about you, April," he admitted and she immediately regretted letting her guard down around him. Of course he was; she hadn't any energy left to act otherwise around him between the front she was putting on for Donnie and Casey.

"You know everything's going to be okay?" he continued earnestly. "You know that, right?"

She looked at him and saw a face as hopeful as if he were waiting for Christmas morning. Donnie and Casey needed to say it was okay to cope, but she knew they were as doubtful as her underneath it all. Mikey believed it with all of his being. And he wanted her to regurgitate it to him on top of it all. And she could have slapped him right then and there for his naiveté. Slapped some sense right into him.

She didn't, of course, and quickly wondered if anything in her face betrayed her. To cover quickly, she hugged him tightly and told him exactly what he wanted to hear. That, yes, everything would turn out. That she was sure Leo would wake up any day now.

"And he'll know what to do," Michelangelo chimed in brightly. "He always does."

After that, she knew she had to put on a face for Mikey as well. So she smiled. And giggled. And put on a good show for everyone. It was absolutely exhausting. But here, in the kitchen, she could let go of the façade.

And she did. Frequently.

She found her hands still deep in the dish water, despite the chore being done, because she knew she couldn't leave yet. Not until she had gotten herself together. It wasn't the first time she had found herself openly sobbing in front of the sink without even realizing she had begun crying.

Without warning the door suddenly swung open and in walked Raphael.

The only person she really hadn't had a confrontation with was Raph, she realized, draining the sink. And…well, Raph was Raph. He had been avoiding everyone even more than usual, her included. And since she wanted pretty much the same thing, they hadn't had much to do with one another. Of all of them, the most socially impaired of the bunch was the only one not driving her crazy.

She rubbed her eyes quickly with the back of her hands, even though she knew it was pretty obvious what she'd been doing. She could feel him staring at the back of her head.

He stood still for a moment and she knew he was trying to decide what he should do. She wished he'd just pretend she wasn't there or that nothing was amiss, get whatever he was after, and leave. He went to the fridge, grabbed a soda, and she thought she was going to luck out before he turned around and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Listen, April," he began. "It's-"

"Don't you do it!" she snapped, pulling her shoulder away from him. "Don't you dare! I swear to God if one more person tells me 'it's going to be okay' I will scream! It's *not* okay! None of this is okay!"

"What the hell are you angry at me about it for?" he barked. "You don't think I know what's going on? I know it's not okay!"

"Well, maybe you should share the information with the others," she snarked bitterly. "They don't seem to be aware."

"I HAVE!" he boomed. "Jesus, April! You think I don't know my brothers? Think I've never been in this situation before? I thought…I thought for sure this time, with all the shit that's gone down…that even they..." he faded off unable to find the words he needed to express his frustration.

She turned to face him and found herself torn between being apologetic or continuing to rail on him. He hadn't done anything to warrant it, but it felt good to take all this pent up frustration that she was forced to keep buried out on someone. Someone that could take it.

Before she could make a decision, his face hardened once again, returning to the emotional state he understood best. "Leo's upstairs right now! How can they – How *dare* they act like it's all going to be fine!"

And that broke her. Seeing him go through the same thing she was. April reached out to comfort him, only to have him pull away from her this time.

"And didn't you just tell me the other night the same damn thing? 'Leo's going to be okay'. Wasn't that what you said?" he demanded.

Her hand dropped and her eyes widened in realization. Her mouth opened and closed lamely in search of providing some sort of explanation. But nothing came out. She had nothing.

"Forget it," he barked, waving her away and exiting the room.

She stared dumbly in front of her at the place where he previously stood, trying to figure out what had happened. How had she become the very thing that had been driving her insane?

April dried her hands quickly and dashed out of the kitchen. She found the others sitting in front of the TV, all except Raph. All of them oblivious to what was going on.

Both Casey and Donnie made room on the couch for her and began a stare down to see whom she'd grace with her presence.

"Wanna play winner?" Mikey happily offered her, waving the game controller in his hand.

She knew where to find Raph. Part of her thought maybe it was best to let it go. Leave him alone. She had clearly bothered him enough. But the part wanting resolution won out.

"I'm going to go check up on Leo first," she answered.

Slowly she ascended the steps, trying to piece together what she'd say. What she'd want to hear. But anything she came up with felt woefully inadequate.

Cautiously she entered the bathroom. Sure enough, Raph was sitting there ever-vigilant over his brother, soda can in hand.

"Listen, Raph," she tried, pulling at her fingers nervously, but he cut in before she got anywhere.

"Don't worry about it. 'S fine. I'm sorry," he stated in a cold monotone.

She realized he didn't even know if he was the one that was supposed to be apologizing or not, that he was just covering all the bases. Anything to get her to leave. And she nearly did, her hand on the door to walk out, but abruptly changed her mind and closed it behind her instead.

He screwed his eyes shut and took a deep breath and she knew that this was the last thing he wanted at the moment, but hoped she was making the right decision anyway.

She positioned herself in a crouching position in front of him. "Raph, look at me," she implored. He opened his eyes mechanically, seemingly more to get it over with than anything, and it brought her back to everything she'd been enduring in recent days. "I'm so, so sorry," she offered as sincerely as possible.

"Yeah. Okay. Thanks," he returned blankly.

"And you need to know," she continued. "That I get it. I really do."

His eyes focused on her then, searching her face skeptically. He took another chug from the can, unable to come up with a response. But at least he was really looking at her now and hadn't completely dismissed the notion as impossible. She thought that was the best she was going to get at the moment, but still something made her linger. She turned to the tub.

"How's he doing?" she asked.

"Oh, you know, the same," he replied, seeming to appreciate the change of conversation, an appreciation that was brief. "He's always the same," he repeated and his voice cracked.

April looked to him immediately and saw his eyes glazing over. Without a second thought, she threw her arms around him. "It's not okay," she choked. A moment later he was holding her as well and they both cried unabashedly into one another until they had nothing left.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed, but they had both found themselves sitting against the bathroom wall side by side afterward. She hated to admit that she felt better. It felt like a betrayal of some sort to the feelings she'd been harboring.

Raphael nudged her in the knee with his soda can, embarrassment keeping him from looking at her. She accepted the offer and took a sip from it. "Don't worry, tough guy," she bumped him with her shoulder. "I won't tell anyone if you don't."

She got a half smile out of him with that and thought maybe she could sit in peace for a change, when she heard Casey bellow for her from downstairs.

"AAAAPRIL!" he called. "Watch me kick Donnie's ass at this game!" And with that she could already hear the bickering begin.

"Oh my god," she breathed, looking at Raph.

"Hey, don't look at me," he chuckled. "You're the one willing to put up with them."

"I'LL BE DOWN IN A MINUTE!" she yelled back, then sighed, "Can't even get a moments peace."

"Now you know why I spend all my time up here."

"Oh, really," she replied knowingly. "I thought you were here for him." April nodded at the tub.

"For that yahoo?" he scoffed. "Nah. He's just being difficult. It's his hobby."

"All the same, I wish he were awake. He'd be a welcome relief to – to that," she nodded to the bathroom door as they heard the argument downstairs getting louder.

Raphael gave her an incredulous look. "You're joking, right? You think he's any better?"

"Well…yeah," she stammered. "Leo'd have to be. He'd know the score. He's realistic like that."

In his best impression of Leo's favorite cartoon character Raph said, "With enough determination, we can accomplish anything" and finished it with a mocking salute.

April spit out the soda in her mouth. "Look what you made me do!" she chastised him, though it wasn't very effective with her still laughing. The fact that he had joined in didn't

help and she realized it was the first time she'd genuinely laughed in a long while, and probably was for him as well.

"What's all that determination getting you now?" Raphael directed at Leo, who was predictably silent. "That's what I thought, asshole." He turned to April and smiled widely. "I win all the arguments now."

She giggled until they heard something crash downstairs.

"For God's sake." She rose to her feet, before turning back to Raphael. "Don't make me go down there alone, please," she implored.

"Yeah, alright," he agreed, rising to his feet. "Hey, idiots!" he shouted down, upon opening the door. "Knock it off!"

April gave Leo one last look, knelt down and whispered. "Come back to us, okay? We all need you. Especially Raph. …Don't tell him I told you that though." She kissed the top of his head and followed Raphael downstairs, feeling more equipped to deal with what lay ahead. At least for the day-

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Big shout out to princessebee for directing me to flesh this chapter out more.

After a return from another trip to the grocery store, April had taken the change left over and placed it in the money jar they had stored out of sight in a cupboard, behind some pots. She sighed, wondering how much longer it could last.

Once they had decided to leave New York and had a destination figured out, it hadn't taken long before they had realized their next immediate course of action. They were going to a house in the middle of nowhere. They were going to need money.

On the outskirts of the city, they had pulled up in front of an ATM machine. The streets were empty, but marred by evidence of recent looting. She suspected the area had already been evacuated. Absolute silence hung eerily in the air in unsettling contrast to the firefight they'd just escaped.

"Guys, I don't like this," Mikey admitted, as they stepped out of the van.

"Donnie, take out the camera," Raphael instructed, ignoring his youngest brother.

Don sighed, but didn't see a way around their predicament and did as asked, all while avoiding Michelangelo's imploring gaze.

"Keep a look out while I figure out how to get into this thing," Raph continued, Casey at his side.

Donatello perched himself on top of the van, looking silently outward.

"Guys…" Mikey tried again.

"We're only taking what we need," Raph snapped, still inspecting the machine. "We've only ever taken what we need."

"Not like this!" Mikey insisted

"Yeah, well," Raphael huffed. "I somehow doubt there are too many junkyards to scrounge around in the middle of nowhere. Not to mention any way to get from one place to another without being seen."

Trying another angle, Mike turned to his other brother. "D," he begged.

"We need the money," Donatello replied weakly, sounding as defeated as they all felt.

"Casey?" Mikey pleaded.

"Dude, I've barely got over ten bucks on me. Don't think that's going to cover us."

"This doesn't feel right," still Mikey persisted.

"You know what else doesn't feel right?!" Raphael barked. "Starving! Get back in the van if it bothers you so much!"

Michelangelo then approached April with big eyes, begging her for another solution.

She didn't know what to say to him. She hated it as much as he did. As much as they all did. She was almost glad Leo wasn't awake for it all, knowing he'd be torn between taking care of his family and his honor. Ultimately though, she knew family would win out, so she looked away from Michelangelo and sadly tucked her hands in her pocket. When she did, she found something inside and her eyes shot open, as she realized what it was.

"Raph, stop," she directed, as he had begun trying to use his sai to pry the ATM open.

He threw down his weapon in frustration, where it clattered loudly on the sidewalk and stepped toward them. Mikey scooted back instinctively. "Do *not* give into his big baby face routine," he shouted at April, pointing at his younger brother. "What would you rather me do? Knock-over the nearest gas station? No one's getting hurt here. The bank will replace whatever we take…or some shit…" He muttered to Casey, "Isn't that how it works?"

"Why are you asking me? I don't fucking know," Casey shot back, as irritated as the rest of them.

"I understand," she said calmly, stepping toward him. Their eyes had locked and as she placed a consoling hand on his arm. "And I agree," she added sincerely. His eyes softened at that and his posture relaxed slightly. "As a last resort. But look." In her hand she revealed the debit card she'd found in her pocket. She had forgotten she had it with all the craziness that had gone on that day. Her father had given it to her to pick up some take-out that afternoon before the whole world went topsy-turvy.

"That's great, April!" Donnie exclaimed cheerfully.

"Yeah, great," Raphael muttered, casting a glare at Michelangelo for making a tough choice all the more difficult. He retrieved his sai and irritably retreated back into the van. Mikey deflated with relief, the confrontation now over.

She knew there wasn't a lot in the account. Her father's lengthy disappearance hadn't exactly helped them in the financial department. Times had been tough and the savings account depleted, but it was better than nothing. She plugged in the debit number, taking everything left in her father's checking account. It didn't feel like much of a victory after the day they'd had, but still…it was something.

"Is it enough?" Raphael asked after some time back on the road.

The turtles, April knew, didn't think about money often, much less how much was needed to run a household. It didn't have much of a place in their lives. How could it? To be fair, she didn't know much about running a house either, young as she was.

She looked at Casey, who shrugged non-committedly.

"It depends," she answered carefully. "Depends on how long we're there. If we play it smart, it could last us a bit."

"Then we'll play it smart," Raphael said with conviction.

And they had. In fact, she'd been rather impressed with them all. Donatello had found a way to tap into the electric grid unnoticed, which was something considering how remote they were. They treated their food wisely, leaving nothing to waste.

Not that there hadn't been some bumps along the way. Smart as he was, Donatello had the hardest time adjusting to life on a budget. On their first venture out for food, he had approached her with a list of tools and hardware to pick up.

"Donnie, this isn't within our means," she said, returning the list to him.

He had looked genuinely confused. "But-But I *need* them," he emphasized, as though an explanation would change the situation.

Of all of them, she figured he was the best at digging up hidden treasures. He knew exactly what he was looking for and wasn't one to get deterred or discouraged easily once fixated. Anything he couldn't find, she was sure he could configure, in one form or another, given time and supplies. Supplies being the key term, as he was stuck in the middle of the woods.

"Don, I understand," she said soothingly, "But it can't be done. You're going to have to make do."

He had pouted about it for a few days, though as depressed as everyone was, she figured she was the only one that noticed.

Another issue had been the prices at the local stores. In their remote location, the small convenient stores carried the bare minimum and at inflated prices. As soon as she found a jar of peanut butter twice the cost of what she was accustomed to, she remembered that her parents used to bring most of their food in with them whenever they visited the farmhouse. Now she knew why.

But, all things considered, they could be doing a lot worse.

Even so, staring at the jar she couldn't help but worry. There was this overwhelming feeling that she should do something, anything to improve their situation. Every day was just more of the same. She could tell the others were feeling it too. The lack of anything constructive to do only led to them getting on one another's nerves more frequently.

With the exception of Donnie. He always had something to keep him busy.

To add to the frustration, she knew the farmhouse had, at one time, been mostly self-sustaining. If they actually had a farm to work, it'd keep everyone busy, if nothing else. But she didn't know the first thing about farming. There was only one aspect of farm life she had any experience with at all.

It was then she knew something she could do. Not that it needed to be done, but it was better than sitting around waiting for something to happen day after day. April grabbed the paper they had picked up, with the intention of finding out any information about the goings-on back home, and turned to the ads.

April knew she'd find Casey in the barn tinkering away on a rusted out truck that she thought was beyond hope of recovering, alongside Donatello working on…whatever he was working on at the moment. She honestly didn't know half the time. Strangely, they had been spending more time together recently. She didn't know if they were just trying to keep a closer eye on each other or what.

She partially blamed Raph's depression as well, Casey not being exactly the type to know how to deal with such things. It was something that had begun concerning her, since the night they'd broken down together in the bathroom. Raphael's continued self-enforced isolation couldn't be improving his state of mind – and watching his best friend grow steadily closer to his brother was unlikely to help any.

"Casey, I need you to do me a favor," April called, upon entering the barn.

He emerged from underneath the truck he'd been working on, smug grin on his face

"I'll help you out, April," Donnie cut in eagerly, which she should have expected, but didn't think about when walking in. Walking on eggshells around the two of them, being forced to constantly think two steps ahead before she said or did anything, no matter how meaningless, was getting to be a real pain.

"I need him to take me somewhere, Don," April explained.

"Casey Jones will take you anywhere you want to go, Red," he agreed with as much swagger as he could muster and she wondered if he could feel the disgusted glare Don was giving him.

"That's great, Jones," she offered, tossing him the keys. "I'll meet you at the van."

She approached Donnie in another attempt to placate him. Something she felt she was constantly having to do for one or the other, draining as it was.

"He needs to keep busy too, Don," she said after Casey was out of earshot. "We all do. Speaking of, what are you working on right now?"

"Something for Leo," he answered. "For when he's back with us. I've been tinkering with possible medicinal applications of mutagen."

For the millionth time, she marveled at his ingenuity and how he could make the most of so little.

"That's amazing, Donnie! And so important," she beamed. "But it's not as easy for the rest of us to feel like…like we're making a difference here."

He nodded thoughtfully in understanding. "So where are you off to? You just got back from a grocery run."

"…You'll see," she managed a weak smile, before heading for the van herself. Truth be told, after hearing what Don was up to, her idea felt all the more senseless, but she was committed at this point.

Less than an hour later, they were nearing home, Casey still at the wheel and April carefully cradling a cardboard box full of baby chickens.

"Mikey's going to flip. You know that, right?" he smirked.

"Honestly, that might be half the reason I got excited about the idea," April admitted. "There's always someone around here selling chickens. They're super cheap if you get them young and more than make up for it with the eggs they provide, so I just searched the ads in the paper and…the chicken coop is just sitting there, so I thought, why not?" She was still feeling a little silly about the whole thing.

"Ads…" he considered, thoughtfully. "You still have 'em?"

"Yeah, why?" she asked.

"Nothing," he shrugged. "Just occurred to me that people around here might need some manual labor. Temp work, y'know? Worth checking out."

"Casey Jones," she gasped in astonishment. "I could just kiss you!"

"So who's stopping ya, Red?" he replied audaciously.

She gave him a sideways look, catching his smarmy expression, but given the gesture, felt it worthy of indulging him. She leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek, the box of chicks chirping in protest as it tilted with her.

She wondered at how both he and Donnie were making themselves useful in such practical ways. Truthfully, the same thought about searching for work had occurred to her. But she knew none of them would have it, her going off to provide for them all. As archaic as it was, she knew it'd be more accepted of Casey. But she'd been reluctant to suggest it, feeling it would be the same as forcing it upon him. She was relieved he had reached the same conclusion on his own. Even so, she worried about the effect it'd have on the turtles.

"Try to be as discreet as possible," she said, as they pulled up to the house. "The others feel bad enough, without it being rubbed in their faces. They want to do more."

"Yeah, yeah. No problem," he agreed and she could see on his face it was something he'd already considered.

Entering the house, she found Raphael and Michelangelo in front of the television, each with a game controller in their hand.

"Mikey, April has a surprise for you," Casey revealed.

"I love surprises!" He abandoned the controller instantly and rushed her to the point that she swung back behind Casey, worried that he'd inadvertently hurt the chicks in his excitement. "What is it? What is it? What is it?" He danced excitedly on his toes, trying to peer around Casey into the box.

"Settle down, Mikey," she instructed. "You have to be gentle."

He immediately returned to a sitting position on the floor and tried to capture a look of zen. "Okay," he inhaled, expression tight with anticipation. "I'm ready."

She caught Raph rolling his eyes as he tossed his controller aside as well, but suspected that he was trying to look less curious than he was. Honestly, she was just happy to see he had momentarily pried himself away from Leo's side.

As she placed the box in Mikey's lap, his eyes grew wide in wonder. "I love them all!" he declared immediately and anyone looking at his face would know it was true, despite the fact that he'd only been introduced to them mere seconds ago.

"You bought…chickens…" Raphael commented in confusion.

"Yeah, worst comes to worst, it's a source of food," she shrugged.

Michelangelo's head was deep in the box, cheeping along with his new pets. Slowly he raised it and looked up at her as though she were monstrous, hugging the box closer to him.

"The eggs, Mikey! The eggs!" she exclaimed.

"Oh good," he exhaled in relief. "Because I already started naming them."

"I don't know, Mikey," Raphael chortled, leaning down and picking one of them up. "This one looks kinda tasty."

"STOP!" he whined. "Leave Miss Cluckington alone!" Then he added thoughtfully, "… Which are the boys and which are the girls?"

"They said there's one rooster, but the rest are hens," April answered. "Though I've seen them be wrong before so we'll have to wait and see."

Raphael examined the chick in his hand closer. "…How can you tell?"

April sighed in exasperation. "I don't know! I'm not an expert! At least we have a source of eggs now."

"Unless they're *all* roosters," Raphael muttered to his brother, who chuckled in return.

"Hey, wiseguy," she snapped. "On your feet. We have a coop to repair."

He raised one brow ridge at her incredulously.

"What, you got something better to do?" she challenged.

He shrugged, placing the chick back in the box. "No, don't suppose I do."

"I'll take care of the chicks!" Mikey volunteered happily, to the surprise of no one.

Before April followed Raphael out the door, she turned to Casey and whispered, "The paper is on the kitchen counter."

"On it, Red," he whispered back and she felt pleased that, at the very least, everyone had something to do.

April caught up with Raphael entering the barn. After a brief explanation, Donnie had risen to his feet in a gesture to assist them.

"What a relief," Raph offered sarcastically, hoisting a roll of chicken wire over his shoulder. "How were we ever going to figure out how to operate a hammer without Mr. Wizard."

April turned to Donatello, hands clasped together with a pleading look in her eye. His annoyed expression relaxed into one of understanding and she gave him a warm smile of gratitude as he returned to his project.

Raphael and April had worked in mostly silence aside from what conversation was needed to complete the job, which suited her fine. It was nice to concentrate on something aside from their troubles for a change. She guessed he felt much the same way given his focus on the task at hand.

A thin tin metal sheet that had acted as a cover for the coop was completely rusted through, now more holes than roof. They managed to find a suitable replacement digging around the barn once again. The sky was turning pink with the day's end as they finished the job by securing it in place over the coop.

"That'll about do it," Raphael said, standing back to admire their work.

"Not bad," she replied. "Not that I imagine they'll be very picky about it."

"Should probably test it though," he suggested, giving her a sideways look.

"…Test it?" she scrunched her face in confusion. She gave out a surprised squeak as he answered by suddenly scooping her up and placing her on the roof.

"Well, if it will hold you, it should be fine," he teased.

"Is that supposed to be some kind of a comment on my weight?" She tried rising to her feet timidly, but immediately thought better of it, the thin metal already warping underneath her. Instead she lay down on her stomach, spreading her weight across it. Resting her chin on her hands, they regarded one another face to face, and for a moment, looking into his clear green eyes, she had no idea what to say.

The moment was brief. Added to the fact that their task was complete, she could see his inner turmoil begin to return to his face. "What was the point of this?" he mumbled bitterly and she wasn't sure if he was saying it to himself, or if he intended for her to answer. Ultimately, she felt it warranted a response.

"When I was younger, I was fascinated with the animals on this farm," she began. "Especially the horses, but I was too young to take care of them. Still, I wanted to help out. Feel grown up, y'know? My grandfather tried to redirect my attention to gardening. We had a huge vegetable garden over there." She nodded to a plot of land next to the house, now grown over. "But weeding wasn't exactly the most exciting thing for a six-year-old."

"Doesn't sound like a very exciting thing for anybody," he chuffed.

"So I was given charge of the chicken coop. It wasn't a big deal. All you have to do is feed them and collect the eggs. They basically take care of themselves. But at the time I felt like I was contributing in such a big way." Her face darkened. "I guess I wanted to feel that way again, but you're right, this was just about as pointless now as it was then."

"April, I-I didn't mean…" he stammered and she could see the distressed look in his eyes.

"It's okay Raph." She forced out a chuckle to relieve the tension on his behalf. "I know you didn't mean anything by it. I'm just being melodramatic. Seems to be our ongoing theme these days."

A moment of silence passed between them before he said anything. "You made Mikey happy. And," he added genuinely, "It was really nice to think about something else for a little while."

"Yeah, yeah it was," she agreed, not feeling the need to hide the sound of melancholy from her voice.

"So…how you holding up?" he asked and she was surprised that of the two of them, it was him to have brought up their brief emotional exchange a few nights back, albeit in a roundabout way.

"Oh, you know, depends on the day," she shrugged. "You?"

"Yeah. Same," he replied. "Today wasn't so bad. Tomorrow…" He shrugged indeterminately in a way that she would have found adorable, if she didn't see sorrow descending upon him once again. If she didn't feel it weighing on herself once again as well.

"Let's get you down from there," he offered.

At another time, she would have brazenly disregarded such an unnecessary act of chivalry, but the thought of being held again with depression taking hold was too much to pass up. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he pulled her down. He lingered a moment, perhaps sensing her need, but it was still all too brief to bring any satisfaction.

As they returned to the house, she knew it wasn't much. That things would return to the status quo almost immediately. He would be back at Leo's side; she would be back in the kitchen preparing dinner. But she had provided a little relief for everyone and that would have to be enough for now.

Chapter 4

Depending on the day, April would wake up in a different state of mind. Some days just the thought of forcing herself out of bed felt like too much to bear, the futility of it all overwhelming her. But then there were days when she felt determined to pull herself out of her funk.

On this particular morning, streaks of light played across her room and over her face, waking her earlier than usual. She realized she'd forgotten to close the blinds the evening prior, but it was undeniably a beautiful morning, lifting her spirits so that she decided she was done feeling sorry for herself. Though she knew full well that it'd have no bearing on how she'd feel tomorrow, she was determined to make the most of it today.

She had been neglecting her training. They all had been, really. She wasn't sure if the guys were too depressed by the abrupt theft of their home and father to find the energy for it, or if they didn't have the drive without Leo. Either way, she was still a novice and couldn't afford the lapse, to lose the muscle memory. So she dressed and went outside that morning, brisk as it was, and started warming up.

It felt good to run through a routine she was familiar with, even if she was a little stiff. After the warm up, she went through some simple striking techniques, testing to see what her body remembered from weeks past. Once satisfied, she moved on to her legs, when a voice interrupted her.

"What're you up to?" Raphael asked, breaking her concentration. She froze in position but could see he was coming from behind the house out of her peripheral vision.

"*Mawashi geri*. What's it look like?" she answered haughtily, because she could already hear the sardonic tone in his voice. She completed another roundhouse kick to drive the point home.

"It looks like you're putting on a good show of it anyway," he snarked, giving her an exaggerated once over, a smug twitch on the corner of his mouth.

April felt her face tense, but strove to keep her form. Of all of them, she knew Raphael was the least convinced she should have begun training as a kunoichi. To be fair, she'd scarcely trained with anyone outside of her sensei and Donnie, but she saw the doubt on his face whenever it was brought up around him. Could just feel the restrained eye roll.

"At least I'm trying!" she snapped. "That's more than the rest of you can say!"

He froze for a moment before positioning himself in front of her and leaning in close, locking eyes with her. "I'm up at five am every morning. I've already gone through my sets and just got back from a run."

She felt her cheeks grow hot with embarrassment as she awkwardly tried to keep her composure. "I-I did not know that," she flustered.

"Now you do," he replied in self-satisfaction, before turning to leave.

"Wait!" she called out, struggling to let go of her pride. "What am I doing wrong?"

He glanced back at her, eyes wryly narrowed, and she half expected him to refuse. But then he turned back, folding his arms across his plastron.

"Let me see your stance," he instructed and she could once again feel him straining to keep sarcasm out of his voice. It only fueled her all the more as she quickly stepped into the han zenkutsu dachi position.

"Well, I'd start there," he said sardonically, unable to suppress his natural impulses.

She inhaled deeply, knowing she'd only made things worse by calling him out for nothing seconds ago. Glancing down she replied as evenly as possible, "My feet are in the right position."

"But your center of gravity isn't," he explained forcefully. "You're putting too much weight on your back foot. Should be evenly distributed."

She exhaled, hoping he couldn't see how frustrated this was making her. She'd been told this before, but had struggled with it in the past. Just how could you tell what percentage of weight you were putting where so precisely anyway? Still, she tried to shift herself as he had suggested.

"Now do the kick again," he directed after placing himself in front of her once more.

She did, putting as much power in the strike as she could. He caught her foot midair with one hand, holding it there, her leg outstretched. Not that she was trying to make it connect. Not that she had expected it to. But he'd done it so effortlessly, it was as though he was taunting her.

"You're not a ballerina. Your strike is here." He grasped her heel and pushed the ball of her foot back to the point she wanted to grimace, but fought against showing it. And of course she knew that. She'd struck with her heel, but apparently not enough to his liking.

"I don't understand," she huffed. "Donnie said I had this down."

He raised a brow ridge at her. "Of course he did, April," he stated flatly.

She glared at him, his cockiness unbelievable. "You are so full of yourself, you know that," she berated. "Donnie is a very accomplished ninja himself, I'll have you know."

He released her foot so that she was forced to quickly adjust her balance and threw up his hands, making it clear he was done assisting her. "I never said he wasn't." He spun away from her, heading toward the house. "But by all means, you keep listening to Donnie. Let me know how that works out for you," he threw over his shoulder before retreating inside.

April growled irritably, kicking a nearby stone across the yard in frustration. The morning wasn't going as brightly as she had hoped.

Raphael had been coaxed away from Leo's side by Mikey, begging for attention as he had a tendency to do. His first reaction was to tell him to bug off. But it wasn't like anyone else had been really interested in his company these days. Hell, he expected Mikey approached him only out of lack of better options. In the end, he found himself parked on the living room couch, pounding away on a game controller.

The screen door slammed violently as April entered the house. Mikey hadn't so much as glanced away from the screen, completely engrossed in the game. Raphael, however, instantly saw how tense she was. He watched as she began to make her way around the room, picking up dishes in an agitated state. He sensed she was ready to explode and was just waiting for an excuse to do so, a sensation he was all too familiar with.

"You suck at this!" Mikey sang out triumphantly, having just won another round.

"What? Compared to you? This is ALL you do!" Raph shot back. Honestly, his attention hadn't been on the game anyway, wondering if there was something he should be doing in that moment for April or if he was supposed to be pretending everything was fine.

"I know," Mikey admitted, despondently. "I wish we had more games. These few are getting boring."

Behind him, Raph sensed April freeze mid-step and turn toward them.

"Boring?!" she spat viciously. "Oh, I'm sorry that the world doesn't revolve around making sure you're entertained. How about a little gratitude that we spent some of the little money we had on that system at all?"

"Whoa! Whoa!" Raph leapt over the back of the couch, took her by the shoulders and directed her into the kitchen, but not without catching his little brother's wounded face as he hugged his knees to his chest.

"Okay, what was *that* about?" Raph asked after shutting the door behind him. "Did something happen or-"

"What's that supposed to mean? Is it too much to ask for a little appreciation?" she challenged.

"No," he shrugged. "But if you really want to have a go at him, let me know next time. I'll hold him down for you."

She angrily slapped dishes on the counter. "If you must know, Donnie and Casey are at it again and I'm up to here with it. Do you want to know why this time? Do you?"

"...Well, I think I know –" he attempted, watching her manically pace around the room.

"Because of a sandwich," she answered tightly.

"A sandwich?" he repeated in confusion.

"Yes, a fucking sandwich!" she shouted, before leaning back against the refrigerator and sliding down to the floor, clearly emotionally drained.

He paused for a moment, unsure of what he was supposed to do. He was never good at this sort of thing. Wasn't exactly the guy people ran to when they needed advice or even just someone to listen to them. Timidly, he sat down on the linoleum floor beside her, waiting for her to continue if she wanted to, as awkward as it felt, because any other option he could think of felt even more awkward.

"I was about to have lunch," she sniffed, attempting to hold back the onset of tears. "And I know I usually let you guys fend for yourself in the afternoon. But I thought Donnie had been working so hard, why not make him a sandwich too. So I went to the barn to ask what he'd like. And Casey was there and it became this - this stupid thing. I would have offered him one too! I didn't see him there!"

"Who does anymore," Raph muttered bitterly.

"And do you want to know what else?" she asked, looking at him now with watery eyes. "I don't even know if this is about me anymore. I left and they were still just…being idiots. They probably still are. Haven't even noticed I left."

"…Do you *want* it to be about you?" Raph asked cautiously. Honestly, he'd never understood why she'd tolerated it as long as she had; when it had been painfully obvious to him it bothered her - at least so far as the competition between the two of them went. It had frustrated him near to point of action on a couple of occasions, but ultimately he didn't think it his place to interfere. It was refreshing to discover that even her boundless patience had its limits.

"What?" She wiped her eyes. "No. No, of course not. Just makes it twice as stupid is all."

There was another awkward silence and he once again felt completely out of his comfort zone. Was he supposed to do something? Say something?

He cleared his voice experimentally. "Well, if it bothers you that much," he began carefully. "You could just make it clear to them…" he trailed off, unsure if he was overstepping his bounds. She shot him a cynical look, her lip lightly curled.

"Typical," she sneered. "This *must* be *my* fault, right? Maybe I don't *know* how I feel, Raph. Ever think of that? Maybe it's confusing. Maybe if everyone would let me be, I'd figure it out on my own. Maybe I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. Maybe I don't want to lose a friend. Maybe a million different things," she finished curtly. She crossed her arms over her chest in a defiant pout.

Well, that had clearly been the wrong thing to say, he realized as he matched her posture, crossing his arms over his plastron irritably. He knew he wouldn't be any good at this, but couldn't she see he was trying? …Maybe he should leave. He had only upset her more.

"Screw those guys," she finished decisively, still misty-eyed and rising to her feet. "They don't get a sandwich. But you know what? You do." She signaled for him to move away from the refrigerator door and he shuffled to the side to comply, staring at her with confusion. Hadn't she just been angry with him? Maybe she did see he was trying his best.

"And Mikey," she added opening the refrigerator door, her eyes suddenly growing wide and watery and he knew she'd just realized how badly she'd snapped at him in the living room. "Mikey gets all the sandwiches," she choked, before turning to rush back to him to apologize.

He reached up and caught her wrist, halting her mid-step. "He'll be fine," Raph assured her as she looked down at him questioningly. "But you're acting a little crazy," he continued, and immediately thought that probably wasn't what she wanted to hear right then. "What do *you* need right now?" he asked quickly, hoping it'd be enough to cover the plethora of mistakes he was making in this conversation.

He could see her face crack then and the tears she'd been holding back start to flow freely. "I don't know," she admitted lamely, and the next thing he knew she had collapsed on the floor again with her face buried in his shoulder, sobbing openly.

"Shit, April. It's not worth all this," he soothed, tentatively patting her back, feeling more uncomfortable than ever. "I suck at this. I'm sorry."

She sat back abruptly and looked at him, their faces inches apart. Abruptly he could see how several freckles clustered together across her nose. He'd never noticed before. "No you don't," she replied emphatically. "You listened. And let me rant. And no one has *ever* asked what I needed before."

He was glad that he hadn't screwed this up as badly as he thought, though he wasn't entirely sure what he'd done or how to repeat it in the future, if it became necessary. Still, it was surprisingly satisfying being the emotional support for someone else for a change.

She wiped the remaining tears from her eyes as clearly as she could, before a look of excitement crossed her face. "Oh! I know what I need!" she exclaimed happily. "Wanna spar?"

"…You serious?" he asked warily, eying her delicate frame.

"Yeah," she enthused. "I really want to hit something. Not you," she added hastily, but he only suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. As if she'd ever land a punch on him – that he didn't allow. "-But you're here so will have to do," she added lightly, already seeming more like her normal self.

"You'll try!" he ribbed, still not sure this was a good idea, but not seeing a way to back out of it now.

"I knew this was a bad idea," he declared aloud, escorting her upstairs to the bathroom while she held an injured shoulder, arm crossed over her chest. He had said it mostly for his own benefit, but knew the words had affected her by the way she dejectedly sat herself on the toilet seat, posture slumped.

Maybe he should have kept the thought to himself. Maybe he should have been nicer to her that morning. Either way, he didn't know how to entertain the pity party she was throwing herself, if the forlorn look on her face was any indicator, so started searching the cabinetry for a tube of icy-hot instead.

"I think it's just a sprain," he began. "You'll be –"

"Why don't you think I can do this?" she interrupted.

He stopped in his search, but kept looking straight ahead rather than at her. This was not a conversation he wanted to have. "I never said that, April."

"I said," she repeated, undaunted, "Why don't you *think* I can do this?"

"I don't *think* it either," he sighed.

"Then what?" she demanded, unrestrained. "What is it? Is this just some macho bullshit or –"

He felt himself tense, the suggestion causing his hands to ball into fists as he cut her off. "I don't know, April. Maybe it's because my brothers and I have been doing this our entire lives and you seem to expect it to happen overnight which is stupid and quite frankly," he continued, now turning to look at her with narrowed eyes to drive the point home, "Just a little insulting!"

It was her turn to look away now, tearing her eyes from his to focus on the dingy-white tiled floor.

He could let up then - perhaps should - but she was the one who had got him going, started this when he'd have been happy keeping it to himself. "If anyone was pulling macho bullshit out there, it was you," he berated, recalling the particulars of their match. He'd allowed her to get a few blows in, thinking that's what she needed. Had done so in a way that he felt wasn't terribly obvious, which he thought was awfully nice of him. But ultimately, he had pinned her to the ground, pulling her arm back, waiting for her to admit defeat. Instead she'd wound up crying out in pain and he'd jumped off of her quickly and helped her to her feet, reciting a veritable litany of apologies.

"Why didn't you tap out? I would have stopped!" he finished, angry that he'd put her in this position, first by injuring her and then following it up with this uncomfortable conversation.

"I've never had to," she answered meekly. "Donnie – He's the only one I've really sparred with at all. I mean, I know –" She paused, shaking her head in frustration, trying to explain. "If it was something that I had to do often, it would have been second nature. I wasn't trying to prove anything. But Don never took it there, so I've never had to think about it before."

He got on his knees in front of her, locking eyes, to make his next point as clearly as he could. To do so in a way that wasn't insulting to his brother, hoping she'd pick up on it this time around. "April, of course he didn't," he replied, nearly mirroring exactly what he had said to her that morning, this time carefully emphasizing every word.

He was relieved when he saw realization dramatically cross her face. That Donnie would never push her. Never stand to see her frustrated. Would tell her what she wanted to hear. Anything to ingratiate himself to her.

He rose to his feet, returning to the medicine cabinet and allowing her to silently process what he'd just revealed to her. He found himself a spot on the floor, shell against the wall, tube of icy-hot in hand, and indicated with a nod of his head for her to sit on the floor in front of him, to which she quietly complied.

He squirted some of the ointment into his hand before it occurred to him that there was a shirt between him and her shoulder. Thankfully, she had already started wrestling her arm out of its sleeve and worked it through the neck of her shirt, though he could tell it caused her some pain to do so.

Unfortunately, he was now met with the strap of her bra and that might have been worse than dealing with the shirt would have been. "Uh…" was all he managed to get out before he caught her roll her head in exasperation.

"It's a bra strap. It will not bite," she said tersely, pulling it aside herself with the opposite hand.

"Hey, I don't know the rules here," he stated, as he started applying the ointment.

"Listen," she began. "You need to know that I'm not rushing things because I'm trying to prove anything. I mean that. It's just…I seem to be the focal point to a lot our problems. I don't want to be a burden."

"None of us think of you that way," he replied, unwaveringly.

"That doesn't make it not true," she maintained. "And I hate it."

He nodded in understanding. It was something he hadn't considered before, but it made sense. He'd hate it too.

She turned to face him. "You have to help me. Please," she implored, hands clasped together.

"Uh, I don't know," he backpedaled. "You've come a long way already. You've held your own alright."

"I've gotten lucky and you know it," she insisted.

"I – I don't think I'm the teaching type, April. I'm not exactly known for my patience."

"But I am," she reminded him. "It'll be fine."

He gave her doubtful look with a tilt of his head and she sighed. "Okay, so I've admittedly been a little unhinged lately. Still, I think I've been holding it together pretty well considering."

He glanced at Leo, still and silent in the tub. He really wished he was awake right now, more than ever. He'd be much better at this sort of thing. Without answering, he spun a finger, gesturing for her to turn around again.

"I'm going to try and massage this out. It's going to hurt at first," he explained. She nodded without comment or making any attempt to push him further on the subject, as though she understood he needed time to mull it over.

And maybe she did understand him after all, on many things besides. She had suggested as much not too long ago. They did seem to be dealing with grief in much the same way. And he'd recently seen she had a rage inside her to rival his own, though she obviously did a better job tempering it.

His train of thought was lost when he felt her body start to give way under his touch. Her initial sharp intakes of breath fighting through the pain changing into quiet moans. He became intensely aware that his hand was kneading her bare flesh, how soft and supple it was, and how close her body was to his. The very idea that he'd ever touch a girl had never crossed his mind, aside from the moment of hard truth, a few years earlier, that it'd never happen. Now he was doing so, and in a way that felt… very intimate, despite its simple necessity. He tensed under the realization flooding him, but she didn't seem to notice. Inwardly, he chided himself, embarrassed to have entertained a thought a foolish as Donnie's pointless yearnings. That was all she needed. Another guy dogging her heels.

It couldn't be easy for her, he mused, being the only girl in a house full of frustrated males.

"We'll focus on your lower body right now," he said finally. "Seeing as you're hurt."

Her head whipped around a wide smile full of gratitude brandished on her face.

"Five am," he asserted. "And no bitching."

"No bitching," she agreed, enthusiastically. "I still can't believe I just allowed Donnie to get away with placating me for so long."

Raph shrugged, mischievous grin crossing his face. "Can hardly blame him. Sparring with you is probably the closest he'll ever get to foreplay." It was a risqué thing to say – especially when he knew, even if April didn't, that he'd just been contemplating her bare skin beneath his hands. But in a way, it also forced him to just deal with it as he had a tendency to do, barreling into things head first. Why pretend like the subject of sex was irrelevant when they were six hormone-addled teenagers?

April's eyes shot wide. "Raphael Hamato!" she shouted aghast, before falling into a fit of laughter. He quickly followed suit, all the tension in the room suddenly dissipating, until they heard a pawing at the door.

"Who is it?" Between her laughter and fighting for air, April barely managed to get the words out.

The door opened and Mikey slid in flat on his plastron across the floor, looking like a dejected puppy. "Do you still hate me?" he entreated, with big, pleading eyes.

"Who could hate that sweet face?" April replied, her voice soft and warm.

Michelangelo's face instantly brightened, his eyes closed soaking in her adoration, complete with a self-satisfied smile. "It is sweet, isn't it?" he agreed.

Raphael rolled his eyes and relinquished his hold on April, knowing she'd be moving to appease him further anyway. He'd seen this act a million times before, allowing his baby brother to get away with murder for things the rest of them would have been held accountable for. Hell, if anything he suspected April would probably be returning from the pawn shop any day now with some new games just to further satisfy him.

"Hey, you okay?" Mikey asked with concern upon noticing her exposed shoulder.

She worked her arm back into the sleeve. "It's just a sprain. No big deal. Raph took care of it."

Satisfied with her explanation, he entreated, "Wanna hang out?", which Raph suspected was half the reason he had shown up anyway.

"Sure," April agreed and started getting up, Mikey already happily barreling his way down the stairs ahead of her. She turned to him once more. "Coming?"

"I'll be down later," he answered. He could use a break from the emotional roller coaster of the day, but was glad she thought to ask him.

"Thanks," she said, sincerely. "For everything today. It's nice to have someone to go to. Someone that will give it to me straight. I hope - " she added, thoughtfully, "I hope you know that I'm willing to be that person for you…if you need it."

He nodded graciously, not sure how else he was supposed to respond, and she quietly slipped out the door.

He exhaled deeply, as though he'd been holding in a breath and hadn't realized it, and resumed his usual place on a stool overlooking Leonardo. "You enjoy all that?" he demanded of Leo, the room now empty and quiet. "Don't give me that look. I know what I'm doing."

Chapter 5

"This is extremely uncomfortable," April strained between gritted teeth. She held one leg extended in front of her, slightly bent at the knee, her body supported solely on the ball of her grounded foot.

"Is it?" Raphael asked, deadpan. "I didn't realize. In that case, we should totally do it your way."

Sweat was beading down the sides of her face and she wasn't sure how much longer she could hold this position. But she pressed on, knowing full well he'd only get harder on her if she let up. She ground her teeth all the more at his sarcasm and barely managed to retort, "Fuck. You."

He smirked at that. "Take it out on the board," he advised. It wasn't much of anything, practically plywood. Or, at least, thin enough to be, but it still seemed to be giving her a run for her money. Not that she had never managed it before with different strikes, but she hadn't ever tried it while performing *kakato geri*. She had just gone through about a half dozen attempts but wasn't keeping her form correct through the movement. His solution was to keep her frozen in place, for god knows how long, in the moment she was consistently breaking form.

If she hadn't been so miserable at that moment, she'd have to admit that she was thrilled at being challenged so quickly. They hadn't been working together long, scarcely over a week, but the first few days made her think that this was going to go in an entirely different direction. He had spent them reviewing stances and blocking techniques with her and she was sure he wasn't going to move on until she'd achieved his idea of perfection, despite the fact that she had already more or less considered these skills mastered. Or worse, she considered the possibility that he was only concerned with her being able to defend herself. That she would not have tolerated. But he surprised her in being satisfied enough to move on.

Considering all this, she shouldn't complain. But Jesus, how long was he going to make her stand like this? If she passed out, then he'd be sorry. …Of course, she'd have a hard time living that down. She tried distracting herself by honing in on another sense outside of the pain. She focused on the smell of wet hay mingled with dirt from the earthen floor of the barn. When he finally let her relax, she couldn't help the audible exhale of relief.

"You hurt your knee last time, didn't you?" he asked knowingly, proffering her a water bottle.

"Yes," she admitted, feeling light-headed. She accepted the bottle and took a sip as she stretched her legs, stiff from being frozen in an unnatural position for so long.

"And why is that?" he prompted.

"I didn't bend my knee on the way down," she regurgitated for him. She had already begun simulating the move in the air once again, bringing her leg all the way up so that it nearly brushed her cheek and then coming back down in a swift motion.

"For added fun this time, how about kicking the board instead of me," Raph snarked. "And don't think you're fooling anyone, April. I know that last time was on purpose."

It was true. She didn't look at him, but knew the wry grin that crossed her face had to have given her away. The exchange was indicative of how natural working with him felt, despite her initial concerns.

The first day, she had woken up bright and early, determined to show how serious she was about improving and how grateful she was for his assistance. But she found herself feeling surprisingly anxious. She was about to be judged on her physical prowess by the one person that valued it more than anyone she knew. Unexpectedly, she found herself worried that he'd think less of her – and the idea bothered her a lot more than she would've anticipated.

April had hoped her clear commitment and dedication would make him feel more at ease about the whole thing, given his initial reluctance. And yet she had found herself feeling neurotic as she warmed up in front of the farmhouse, waiting for him. When he had stepped out, she almost instinctively bowed to him formally, as she'd been taught.

He had paused and eyed her with discomfort before commenting flatly, "Don't make it weird, April."

She had relaxed instantly, nearly snickering at herself for feeling that anything should be different between them. She was still her and he was still him and they trained together just as they would have done anything else together.

"Ready to try again," he asked, knelt before her, board held firmly in his hands.

"Yep," she agreed, retaking her stance in front of him.

"Lock at the apex and bend on the way down," he reminded her.

She nodded and took in a deep breath, concentrating on the board. Then, with a quick motion, she performed the maneuver, her heel crashing through the thin wood.

"WOO-HOO!" she whooped, arms raised over her head in triumph.

"ALRIGHT!" he cheered and she couldn't help but beam back at him. Her victories seemed to be his own. It might have been her favorite thing about working with him. Not only because they both found it rewarding, but because she knew her successes were genuine. Raphael couldn't be anything other than genuine. It was a quality she found she admired in him and was surprised that she hadn't really taken note of it before.

And the smile he was offering her at that moment was equally genuine, brightening his face, changing his whole demeanor. The kind that he so rarely wore, making it all the more meaningful when he did. The kind that, as of late, she had come to unexpectedly associate with a flutter of butterflies in her stomach.

She recalled a similar sensation, a few days prior, when she had stumbled after twisting her ankle during a particularly difficult maneuver. Rather than hitting the ground, she found

herself in his arms. Her stomach had flip-flopped at the feel of his hardened bicep cradling her.

She wasn't really sure where these feelings were coming from, but admittedly, she hadn't spent much time with him in the past, at least not exclusively. It hadn't been a conscious decision. He was more closed off than the others, so it would only be natural that more effort would have to have taken place for a relationship to build and it just never happened. Too many distractions in their lives, she supposed.

She was grateful for the opportunity to get closer to him, even as the flush she was currently experiencing made it disconcerting at times.

Raphael watched the multi-colored spinner twirl as he lounged comfortably on his bean bag. It landed on a three and April moved her pink-pegged game piece. The board was old, The Game of Life box yellowed and looked as though it dated back to the 60s. There were others like it, kept in the farmhouse for decades as diversion for anyone who finally got desperate enough with the loads of nothing to do.

"How come you're a superstar and only have a salary of thirty grand?" he teased her.

"Because I'm progressive like that," she answered without hesitation. "Besides, you're the one with three kids." She pointed at his red car, loaded down with pink and blue pegs.

"I can't take care of all these assholes," he admitted.

It had become a regular thing for them, playing a board game in the afternoon. Both of them relaxed into their bean bags on the cool tile floor.

He was not surprised the day she had come home with a box laden with items from, he assumed, a nearby pawn shop, though he thought it stupidly frivolous given their situation. As suspected, she had a couple of new video games for Mikey, albeit old ones for the outdated system. She also had a few VHS tapes for them to share. Most of the remainder of the box went to Donnie, loaded down with a mish-mash of electronics, from busted computers parts to outdated telephones.

Nothing for him, as per usual. He knew she would, of course, if he asked for anything. But he wasn't going to do that – as much out of pride as he knew they needed to stretch the money they had left as far as it could. Next thing you know they'd be berating him again for his 'extreme' solutions to their money issues. All the while, he was the only one not partaking in non-essentials.

He had been brooding about this, perched over Leo, when she had appeared in the doorframe.

"You left before I could give you this," she said, dragging in two bean bags. "It's got to be more comfortable than that stool you sit on all day," she answered his questioning eyes.

"I don't need anything," he replied with a dismissive wave of the hand.

"Jesus Raph, I know you don't *need* it." She rolled her head in exasperation. "It's bad enough that I have to guess for you. You never ask for anything."

He continued staring doggedly ahead, refusing to acknowledge all the reasons he didn't want to accept her generosity.

"Raph, I know you're worried about our situation," she sighed. "But…it's being taken care of. We're doing alright."

He knew what she was referring to. He was almost always up before the others, but sometimes Casey had beaten him to it. He'd seen him drive off in the early morning hours on more than one occasion and he wouldn't show back up for hours. It didn't take much to connect the dots. Still, he couldn't imagine whatever he was bringing to the table was much. Not to mention, he hated being provided for, particularly without being able to contribute in any way himself.

"Besides," she continued. "I got all of this at a yard sale for under twenty bucks. It's junk to everyone else." She paused thoughtfully and he knew she must be wondering at the turns her life had taken that other people's trash had become treasures. It was nothing to him – that's the way it had always been.

"You got two," he finally said.

"'Course. One's for me silly," she replied, tossing them both on the floor and plopping down into one. "You spend too much time alone in here."

"Let me guess," he smirked. "You're going to fix that."

"That's the plan," she chirped. "Oh! That reminds me!" She had sprung to her feet and dashed out of the room. He took the opportunity to switch from the stool to the bean bag and had to admit it was infinitely preferable.

She had returned holding a box with a self-satisfied look on her face to see him behaving less stubbornly.

"Yahtzee?" he asked.

"Why not?" she challenged, returning to her bean bag and spreading the pieces of the game between them. "Might as well do something while you're doing nothing."

He hadn't argued. He doubt he'd have won if he had tried, without being an ass about it anyway. And he had to admit she wasn't bad company. They conversed easily and seemed to share a similar sense of humor. Mikey joined them from time to time, but he found he preferred when it was just the two of them. It was decidedly more low key without him.

"*The Game of Life*?" Casey asked, Casey asked, appearing suddenly in the doorway and startling him out of his recollections. "Seriously?"

"What's it to you?" Raph replied bitterly.

Casey shrugged and sat himself between them, cross-legged. "So is this what you two get up to all day?"

"Not all day," April answered. "Just something to do while we're watching after Leo."

Raph drew a card from the pile. "Are you kidding me!" he shouted.

"Let me see! Let me see!" April insisted, bright-eyed with a wide smile. He begrudgingly handed her the card and she put a mock somber look on her face. "Divorce happens, Raph. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

Casey eyed them both and then the card. "That card's handwritten," he commented.

"We've made some improvements," April explained casually.

"Soooo…what happens when you get a divorce then," he asked as Raph removed the pink peg from his car and handed it to April.

"I laugh," April answered simply, taking the peg and examining it closely. "I told you she was no good for you, but would you listen? Noooo."

"I can't believe I have to raise all these assholes by myself," Raph muttered.

Casey glanced at them both again, with growing uncertainty. "Who's the third piece?" he asked, pointing at a blue car.

"That's Leo's," Raph mumbled and spun the wheel for his unconscious brother. It landed on an eight, giving him a choice position. April and Raph regarded one another as he nudged it back to the seven and they both smiled. "Ooh, so close."

"Leo doesn't win very often," April confided to Casey in a hushed tone.

"Uh-huh," Casey nodded hesitantly. "But why does he have two blue pegs in his car?"

"Casey," April started in a chiding tone. "We don't judge Leo's life choices and neither should you."

Raphael snorted in a barely contained laugh.

"You two are weird," Casey decided, before rising to his feet to leave. "Wanna watch a movie later?" he asked. Raph frowned, taking note he was directing the question to her.

"Sure, sounds good," she agreed. "In fact we all should after dinner. Feels like we haven't been all together for awhile."

"See you tonight then." Raphael could tell by his tone that a family night wasn't what he originally had in mind. Served him right.

"Dumbass," Raphael grunted, when he was sure Casey was out of earshot.

"Now, now," April reproved, gently.

"Like you don't think so too," he challenged.

"Well, he can be," she admitted. She paused thoughtfully and chuckled to herself as though remembering something that had passed between them. "He can be a lot. But you know he's not avoiding you maliciously, right?"

He paused in mid-movement of his game piece for a moment, but continued looking at the board. She'd notice his surprise at how immediately she'd seen through him if he met her gaze.

"Yeah, apparently I'm only fit to pal around with if I'm in a good mood," he retorted, sharply.

"So never then," she teased.

"Cute, April," he grumbled. "Real cute."

"Don't take it personally," April advised. "He just…doesn't know how to deal with anything real. Or at least anything heavy. I'm sure he wants to be there for you but doesn't know how."

"Because he's a dumbass," he repeated.

"Because he's a dumbass," she agreed with a soft smile. He felt himself fluster at the sight of it, perhaps in light of how well she seemed to understand him. He returned his gaze to the board for fear she'd see through him again.

Raphael knew dinner time had to be approaching if his stomach was any indicator, not to mention the dimming light outside, but he hadn't heard any movement downstairs to suggest as much. He retreated from Leo's side and went down only to find Mikey still plugging away at one of his new games, expression full of concentration. He suspected he hadn't moved at all that day.

"Where is everyone?" Raph asked him.

"Dunno," Mikey replied simply, not bothering to look at him.

Raph sighed at his lack of helpfulness and walked outside. He saw April exit the barn and even from his place on the porch he could tell she was wound tight enough to snap. It didn't take a genius to guess the reason behind it and he felt himself bristle as he made his way across the yard toward her. He watched her round the corner of the barn and sit purposefully beside it.

As he drew closer, he could hear squabbling from within. The fact that he expected as much meant nothing. He felt himself move with purpose toward the barn door, before he remembered the reason behind his anger and detoured to April first.

She was lost in her own contemplation, her body language full of quiet defiance. She started when he approached her.

"What got them going this time?" he asked in a low growl.

"Does it even matter?" she demanded sharply, but he knew her tone wasn't directed at him. "Something stupid. It's *always* something stupid."

"You don't have to sit here and listen to this," he said, looking at her intently.

"Call it morbid curiosity. I want to see just how long they can keep this up when it's not for my benefit," she spat loudly and he suspected that she half-hoped they heard her.

He felt himself roll his shoulders brusquely as he returned to his original purpose. She didn't try to stop him. Truthfully, he didn't know if she even realized what he was about to do, so determined was she to see things through her way.

"HEY ASSHOLES," he thundered, entering the barn.

Startled, Casey and Don immediately stopped their bickering. They both quickly adopted a defensive posture, Casey's fists clenched to his sides and Donnie flippantly crossing his arms over his plastron trying to strike an air of indifference.

"Who are you calling an asshole?" Casey demanded.

Raph met him in two long strides. "You. Asshole," he repeated, shoving him in the shoulder with one large hand.

"You got something to say to me?" Casey rounded on him, fist clenched, putting himself in Raphael's face so that their foreheads nearly touched.

"You want to go? We can go right now," Raphael challenged, eyes narrowed. "Won't change the fact you're an asshole." When Casey didn't rise to the bait, he stepped back. "In case you two haven't noticed we're in a shitty situation and April's doing all she can to hold us together. Can't you see you're driving her insane?"

At the mention of her name, they both sheepishly looked around the barn, remembering that she had been there when the fight broke out.

"Yeah, she's gone," Raphael snapped. "I guess watching you two wave your dicks around isn't all that exciting for her. Imagine that."

"Whatever, Raph," Donnie waved him away dismissively, making to return to his work area.

"What do you mean 'whatever'?" Raph countered, angrily. "I especially expect better of you!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Casey pressed, irritably.

"Shut up, Case," Raph dismissed, shoving him to the side once more and focusing on his brother.

Donatello paused thoughtfully before turning to face him again. "I mean, you aren't exactly the one to lecture us on keeping our cool." He kept his demeanor collected and calm in a way

that always infuriated Raph, as though he were above everything.

"I'll show you how well I keep my cool!" Raph finished decisively before doing the exact opposite by pouncing on him.

A tussle wasn't what he had intended to happen, but then that was often the outcome regardless of his intentions. Casey had soon joined in and the three of them went at it, though not long enough for his liking with Donnie eventually recomposing himself and refusing to participate. Raphael watched as he withdrew to the house with an ever so slight limp. He felt fairly certain that he was putting it on for April's sake. The same thought must have occurred to Casey, given how quickly he dashed after him. It wasn't like the human hothead to leave a fight unfinished.

Left alone, blood still boiling, he picked up a nearby crowbar without realizing it and busted the taillight of the junk-pile of a truck Casey had been investing all of his time into. It brought little satisfaction, particularly since he doubted it'd even be noticed given the state of the vehicle. He threw the tool to the side angrily, the darkening sky matching his mood.

Ultimately, he should have suspected things would go down the way they had. He hadn't had an outlet for so long away from the criminal element of the city. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't itching for any excuse he could find, even if it wasn't his original intention. Still, the moment came and went so quickly it didn't bring much relief.

Gradually, he remembered what had started the mess in first place and went to see if April was still sitting doggedly next to the barn. She wasn't. He couldn't help but wonder how much of it she had deciphered through the wall.

"So much for movie night," he muttered to himself.

It was hard to focus the following day on her training, the events of the night before fresh in her mind. She wasn't surprised that Raph had gone to her defense. That was his nature. She was surprised, however, to discover how much the gesture had touched her. And equally surprised that the other two didn't seemed phased by his words in the slightest.

As a result, she found herself feeling that Raphael was more mature than she had once considered, which she supposed was unfair. It wasn't completely true, considering his temper. But he seemed more so in the ways that *she* appreciated at any rate. Particularly in that he didn't expect anything from her, which was a relief from feeling at times like she wasn't fulfilling the – many, varied and ever demanding - expectations of the others. If anything, the role was reversed here and she hoped he didn't feel any undue pressure from her as a result.

Furthermore, he treated her as equal. Not that the others were ever derogatory toward her, but she was undeniably treated differently. It didn't typically upset her. Both Casey and Don had made their intentions clear, so of course that substantially changed the way they viewed and interacted with her. Still, it was refreshing that Raph held her to the same standards he'd expect from anyone and it made interacting easier than she thought it would be with someone so brusque. She knew it was because he didn't look at her that way and was surprised that she felt something akin to disappointment at the realization.

Initially she had attributed this feeling to the idea that she naturally wanted to be desired, which was altogether infantile and thought it to be embarrassingly 'teenage' of her. But gradually she wondered if there wasn't something more to it. She'd find herself admiring his musculature, more prominent than that of his brothers, in an entirely new way out of the corner of her eye as they trained.

It wasn't as though the idea was completely foreign to her, though still undoubtedly bizarre. But Donnie's pursuit had made it impossible not to have considered it and she admittedly was still rather indecisive on the whole thing. She wasn't lying to Raph when she told him she didn't know how she felt. She didn't for many reasons, not the least of which was Donnie was a mutant turtle. However, she was surprised to find that she didn't outright dismiss the notion in spite of this fact. In truth, it was becoming less of an issue by the day. They had been everyday figures in her life for so long at this point, she scarcely noticed anymore.

Her mind was decidedly elsewhere. In fact, it felt to be a million different places at once. She must be doing a good job hiding it though, as he didn't seem to notice.

"Before we call it a day, can we go back over the spinning back fist?" she asked him. "I'm still having trouble putting any power behind it."

"Sure, let me see what you got." He pointed to an old chicken feed bag they had filled with sand and hung from the rafters of the barn, making a suitable punching bag.

She went through the motions several times against the punching bag and he watched thoughtfully. "I feel like I'm doing it right," she explained. "But I don't feel like it's doing much damage."

"You're doing it right," he agreed. He walked up behind her and matched her starting stance. Slowly, they performed the steps together, his hand on her waist, focusing on its rotation and she felt herself flush. Truthfully, it was why she asked in the first place. She pressed further against his body, feeling safe in this experimentation. He wouldn't know. He was far too cynical think anything of it.

"Do you know why I want to focus on your rotation power?" he asked as they went through the steps together again and she couldn't help but focus on the firmness of his hand on her waist, the unyielding plastron against her back.

"No," she admitted, feeling ridiculously giddy but making a conscious effort to keep it to herself.

"Your lower body strength is good, but your upper body..." he drifted off and she knew where he was going with this and realized he was worried she'd find it insulting. "It's only going to go so far."

"I get it, Raph. I'm a girl," she said, dryly. "Wouldn't want to chip a nail when punching somebody."

"No lip," he insisted, releasing her.

"Yessir," she barked, playfully giving him a mocking salute.

Their eyes locked unintentionally and a moment of awkward silence passed between them. It occurred to her that she could say or do something to encourage whatever was happening between them, if she was reading the signals correctly, but she didn't know how.

Instead he cleared his throat and the moment passed. "Besides, it doesn't mean you can't make your upper body strikes more effective," he explained. "Rotational power will give you that, but we need to work on your core."

"You're the boss," she agreed cheerfully.

As they returned to the house together, she swore she felt his eyes on her body. Trying to catch him in the act, she glanced his way, only to find him intently staring at nothing in the sky. She smiled to herself, wishing she had just allowed it.

April woke up particularly early the next morning in order to beat Raph. The sky was still dark and normally she'd find it difficult to pull herself out of bed, but she was so full of nervous energy that going back to sleep was out of the question even if she had wanted to.

She tip-toed downstairs and into the kitchen and climbed onto the countertop to reach a picnic basket stored in the top cabinetry. She regarded it fondly for a moment, always having been excited when it was brought out by her parents long ago, before she started packing it with breakfast items.

She sat herself on the porch swing, thankful that it was a particularly warm morning for early spring. As the sun broke the horizon, a loud crow interrupted the quiet chirping of birds. It had become clear a few days earlier that one of the chicks she brought home was definitely a rooster, much to everyone's chagrin as rude awakenings became a daily occurrence.

Raph would be down soon, she knew. She swung her legs absently, nervous about her intentions, knowing he wasn't going to make it easy on her. But she was supposed to be an empath or something. She was just going to have to trust what she'd felt in the barn the day before.

She heard his heavy footsteps on the stairs and found herself offering a hearty "Good morning" too eagerly as he pushed the screen door open.

"Morning," he returned slowly, eyeing the picnic basket in her hand suspiciously. "What's all this?"

"I want to show you something," she answered, unable to stop the smile that broke out across her face as she noticed the intent look of his bright green eyes, trying to piece together what was going on. "And I brought us breakfast."

He crinkled his brow and shook his head. "This is how it starts," he began. "You skip training one day and then, before you know it, it becomes two and then-"

She placed a hand over his mouth to halt what was sure to be a long-winded rant about discipline. It was funny how very much like Leo he could be when it came to staying in peak physical form, though she doubted he'd appreciate the comparison. He stopped talking and she suspected it was more out of shock that she was touching him than because she wanted him too. Maybe that was just wishful thinking on her part. She felt his breath warm on her hand and it made her all the more determined to press forward.

"Who said anything about skipping training?" she asked, lowering her hand once more. "Does it matter where we do it?" she responded to his questioning glance.

"…No," he admitted with a shrug and she could see he was still confused. That was okay; she needed the upper-hand today.

"Well, come on then," she insisted, walking down the porch steps ahead of him before he could argue.

They started down a path in the woods that had once been well known to her. She actually had gone down it on her own soon after they had first arrived to see if anything had changed. It was hard to tell at the time, with so many of the trees still bare as her family tended to spend summers there, but it felt more familiar now that things were budding into life.

She could tell he was uncomfortable, unsure what this was all about and tried to distract him with conversation. "There's a stream up ahead. I used to go there all the time when I was little. It was a special place for me. Doesn't feel right going there alone though. I tried once, when we first got here. It was really depressing. Thanks for coming with me."

He perked up at that, as though he felt better having some purpose behind this outing, which she thought was silly. Why did there have to be a reason for them to hang out?

She took the opportunity and reached out, taking his hand in hers. It was a calculated move and she continued talking as though nothing had happened, pointing out a tree she used to climb and recounting a story about how she'd gotten stuck in it once when she dared to go too high. Funny, even to her own ears there was nothing in her voice that gave away how fast her heart was racing or how the feel of his big hand around her own sent goosepimples scattering over her skin.

"I felt like I was up there for hours and was absolutely distraught. In reality, it was probably more like fifteen minutes before my dad found me, like they weren't going to notice I was missing. But I was sure I was going to die up there at the time."

She very much doubted he heard anything she had said. He had spent the entire conversation looking at his hand and then back up to her face and then back down to his hand and slowly up to her face again repeatedly. It was as though he knew she'd made some mistake and if he kept pointing it out to her in this way she was going to figure it out. Instead, she went right into another story about a family of rabbits she found one time. His hand still hung limply in her own.

"Uh, want me to take that?" he offered suddenly, nodding towards the basket. She was worried he was using it as an excuse to break free from her, but he reached out with the

opposite hand.

"Sure, thanks," she agreed, handing it to him as she tried to keep things as nonchalant as possible.

Finally, he returned her gesture, squeezing her hand in his and an undeniable spark ran through her. She knew, even now, he was too cynical to think much of it. His mind was busy explaining it all away somehow. But it didn't seem to matter because she was sure. Whatever little doubts remained were chased away when his hand tightened around hers.

They reached the bend in the stream she was looking for. She didn't want to break contact with him, but she didn't want to make him feel awkward again either, so she released his hand and took the basket from him once more, placing it by the stream. Then, as though nothing else had happened that morning, she began warming up and he followed suit, looking much more at ease.

Today has started out weird, he thought to himself, sitting side-by-side with April on the grass. He took another bite out of one of the muffins she had packed for them. Of course, he was probably overreacting like an idiot. He'd seen her be affectionate with…well, with everyone. So she held his hand? It didn't mean anything.

The only thing that really nagged at him about it was that nothing had prompted it. Any other time she had offered something similar there had been a reason behind it whether it be because she felt someone needed encouragement, or to be nurtured, or sympathy…but there was always *something*. Try as he might, he couldn't put a finger on why she had reached out to him today.

He couldn't deny the way he felt when she took his hand though. But there was little point on dwelling on the unobtainable. Best not to even go there.

"My parents used to take me on picnics here all the time," she said, breaking him from his reverie. He sensed a touch of melancholy in her voice.

"It's nice," he commented. The sun shone through the trees in rays of light as the creek babbled in front of them. "I'm really sorry your dad couldn't make it here with us," he added, guessing the reason for the tone in her voice.

She nodded solemnly. "I'm sorry Splinter couldn't too. You know, my father hasn't been around much lately for obvious reasons. Even when he was, he wasn't really himself anymore. Splinter's been more of a father figure to me in a lot of ways in recent times. I really miss him."

He regarded her with genuine admiration in that moment, that she could think of one of them in such a sincere and intimate way. "You're a good person, April." It was a lame thing to say but he'd said it before he could properly consider the words. Nonetheless, she beamed back at him in a way that made him feel she understood the gravity of what he was trying to say, and a little smile lifted his mouth in response.

"He'd like it out here. All the peace and quiet." A mischievous grin crossed her face. "Though I suppose some of us are going stir crazy." She eyed him knowingly.

He paused in the midst of taking another bite. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Thanks for sticking up for me the other day," she answered, and unless he was very much mistaken, there was a coy tilt to her head.

"Oh…you heard that?" he asked, embarrassed and confused.

"Kinda hard not to," she teased. "I think the neighbors might have heard, which is really saying something since we don't have any. I'm curious though, what *was* your master plan? How were you going to stop a fight by turning it into a brawl?"

"Jesus, April." He stared away from her at the ground, absently rubbing the back of his skull with one hand. "That wasn't what I wanted to happen or anything."

"I'm just messing with you, Raph," she laughed. "Serves 'em right, I say. It's not like anybody got hurt."

Something about the way she said the word 'hurt' reminded him of his brother limping away after the incident. "If Donnie came to you bitchin', he was putting up a front," he stated defensively. "Nothing happened that was all that."

"I know," April giggled. "But I played along with his 'Raph's a big bully' routine anyway, to smooth things over."

"Don't be doing me any favors," he grumbled.

She surprised him by taking his hand in hers and once again he couldn't pinpoint a reason behind it. She scooted closer to him so that they were sitting hip to hip. He felt sure his heart was beating so loudly that she must be able to hear it.

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" she asked shyly, eyes fixed to the stream ahead.

"No," he answered as straight as he could, despite it being the furthest thing from the truth. In reality, he could hardly breathe.

"Good," she replied. "Last thing I want to be is like one of those knuckleheads." Her joviality sounded forced. "It's just - Remember when I said I wasn't sure how I felt?"

He didn't answer. He couldn't answer. He didn't think it was possible for his heart to be pounding any harder than it had been moments ago, but it was. He could feel the pulsing in his throat.

"Well, I do now," she finished. "Know how I feel, I mean." She looked at him intently then. He couldn't bring himself to meet her gaze.

This wasn't an eventuality he had prepared for. Why on earth would he have? A million things flashed through his mind at once. The smell of her hair. The way her hand felt in his.

How her eyes crinkled at the corners when she smiled. How she never gave up no matter how hard he made it on her. The wonderful sounds he elicited from her when massaging her shoulder. The delicate bones of her shoulders. The way she genuinely made him feel good about himself when taking care of her.

"Raph?" She was waiting for a response that was too late coming, sudden apprehension in her eyes. "Raphael, if you don't feel the same way - say something."

He wasn't sure what a panic attack felt like, but he was pretty sure this had to be something close. Never mind the dozens of objections his cynical mind could come up with - for every reason he wanted to embrace what had been miraculously presented to him, there was just one glaring reason not to, and it was sufficient. All the times he teased Donnie – was an asshole to him - for hoping for the impossible. The times he bluntly told him it would never happen, not wanting to see his brother get hurt. Hell, he'd even told off Casey for trying, in Donnie's defense, even when he knew it was a hopeless cause. What kind of brother would he be to betray him so horribly?

"Say anything," April pleaded, a note of desperation in her voice.

He finally forced himself to look at her imploring face. He couldn't believe he hadn't noticed how perfect she was before. The blue depths of her eyes, her freckled cheeks, the strands of bright red hair that trailed across her forehead, stirred loose from their session. Her lips, partially chapped from the still mostly brisk, dry weather. He focused on those lips. Would she let him kiss her, he couldn't help but wonder, hard to believe though it was that this was happening to him, if he said the right thing?

But even as the thought played temptingly through his mind, he remembered his brother.

He swallowed hard and through a dry mouth forced himself to say, "I don't feel the same way."

"Oh…" she uttered quietly and he could barely believe how disappointed she looked. She let go of his hand instantly and scooched away from him, a deep blush crossing the pale skin of her face, and now his heart was just sinking, plummeting straight into his gut as he comprehended what he had done. "I'm so, so sorry," she offered. "And quite frankly dying of embarrassment."

It pained him as she watched her rise to her feet, her expression clearly indicating this was not how she had seen this playing out, and was stunned all over again. "If you don't mind," she continued. "I'd like to walk back by myself. I – I need a minute."

She started mechanically picking up various items they had removed from the basket and placing them back inside. He wanted to say something to make this easier on her, but honestly was just in awe of how composed she was acting when he felt like he didn't know what to do with himself. He felt torn between going to her, taking it all back, and punching something. Donnie's stupid face came to mind. He felt himself clenching and unclenching his fist with indecision.

Instead he heard himself offer lamely, "I've got this," grabbing the basket. He had no illusion that he had hidden the pained look on his face, but she didn't respond to it in any way, either misinterpreting the reason behind it or too lost in her own embarrassment to notice.

She had started to leave before pausing and addressing him once again. "Listen, you don't need to worry about me, y'know, bothering you. I'm really not like those idiots. And I'd really appreciate it if you could pretend like none of this happened tomorrow, if that's at all possible." She fought to her voice even and seemed unsure what to do with her hands. Despite this, she managed to keep eye contact, which was nearly impossible for him to match.

"Yeah, okay," he agreed, even though it wasn't possible. He watched her walk away, head held high, and marveled at her once more. And what he'd just done. He realized that not only was it not possible, he was certain this moment would be haunting him the rest of his life.

---

*Author's Notes: I haven't done many author's notes for this story. I guess I think it speaks for itself. However, I thought I'd take a moment to clarify something after this chapter. While I clearly am a raphril shipper, that doesn't mean I really have any problems with the canon relationships built within the series. A lot of people seem irritated with the love triangle but I think it works great. Why? Because it's a very teenage way to behave. Donnie and Casey are not bad people. Are they going about this in the right way? No, of course not. But it's because they're young, not because they're creepy. And I like that the show is smart enough to call them out on it from time to time. It'd be a completely different matter if April had made it clear that she wasn't at all interested. Then their behavior would be extremely inappropriate. As it is, it's just annoying. Guess what kids? Teenagers are often annoying. (If you're a teenager reading this, don't worry. You'll grow out of it. ...Probably. *winks*) That being said, having been in her position before, I warn anyone acting similarly that this is often how it ends up playing out. While it's nice being desired, being too needy and clingy wears thin quickly. A real relationship can't be forced and evolves naturally. Just my two cents.*

Chapter 6

She lingered in the sanctity of her bedroom much longer than usual. She had decided to skip training that morning – an attempt to put off a little longer the awkward (and unfortunately unavoidable) –confrontation that would be awaiting her. She assumed Raphael wouldn't be expecting her anyway, after she had made such a fool of herself.

April sat in front of the vanity mirror, examining her face doefully. She had to admit that she wasn't looking her best these days. Her pale complexion without the addition of any color made her look washed out. Her lips looked thin, dry and chapped. Her skin felt dry and papery to the touch and even her hair – hair she had defiantly struggled to be proud of despite the taunts on the playground as a child – seemed lank and less bright. They had left New York with such haste it wasn't as though she had time to collect all her cosmetics. Not that she ever wore much, but it was something.

There had been a couple of times whilst out shopping for the family she had dawdled in the beauty aisle, wondering if she could justify stretching their meagre funds far enough to buy a small tube of Aveeno, but in the end she had decided it simply wasn't a necessity.

April pouted at her reflection. Realistically, she knew that the blow her self-esteem had taken was probably affecting the way she saw herself – she even knew her appearance had nothing to do with Raphael rejecting her - but she couldn't help but fixate on it all the same.

She sighed deeply, absently picking at a piece of chipped paint on the worn dresser. Strange as it was, she was more worried about the affect all this was going to have on Raphael. Avoiding one another was going to be impossible, but she felt like she could ultimately move on quickly enough. But Raph was a whole other animal and didn't tend to let things go easily. Not to mention that he'd be more inclined to avoid an uncomfortable situation while she'd just like to power through it and get things back to normal as quickly as possible.

Mostly she was frustrated at herself for being so reckless. But, to be fair, she was pretty certain at the time that he had felt the same way. How could she have misinterpreted the signals? Why did she think she sensed a deeper connection?

"Some mind-reader I'm turning out to be," she muttered to her reflection. It'd be funny if it made a lick of sense. She'd deciphered more from people she barely knew with less to go on in the past.

It was late morning, practically afternoon, the sun shone brightly through her window as a soft breeze fluttered the sheer curtain within. She was surprised that no one had come to check on her by now. Perhaps they thought she should have a morning to sleep in. Perhaps

Raph had suggested something to make them leave her alone? But she could hear them all in the living room now, their muffled voices echoing up the stairs.

What she really wanted was to lie around in her pajamas, eating comfort food and watching mindless television all day, but that wasn't going to happen. She knew she needed to talk to Raph eventually, to somehow convince him that things didn't have to be weird between them. Approaching him first among the others might make the transition easier, show him that nothing had changed. And with them all collected in the living room she was being given the perfect opportunity. So, much as she wanted otherwise, she mechanically went through the process of getting dressed.

"Morning," April offered, entering the living room, forced smile in place and striving to look as natural as possible. She found Donnie and Raph sitting on opposite ends of the couch, with Mikey on the floor between them.

"More like afternoon, Red," greeted Casey from his place in the armchair.

It was rare to find them all sitting around the television so early in the day. If they ever all came together, it was usually during dinner. Not that there was much call to do otherwise. While they had full access to electricity, cable was another matter, and they were lucky if they got three channels clearly.

Her gaze drifted helplessly toward Raphael who was the only one in the room who hadn't acknowledged her. Not that anyone else would have noticed – but to her eyes, he was almost painfully focused on the television screen. He switched from channel to channel, remote control in hand, and to her astonishment none of them were the familiar static.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"You said you wanted more options, so voila!" Donatello answered triumphantly, gesturing grandly to the television.

Abruptly, she recalled mentioning to him in a quiet moment together that the lack of entertainment out here wasn't making things any easier. No outlets made it harder to distract from their frustrations and led to them lashing out at one another more than they normally would have.

Donnie had listened quietly, and agreed, though she knew he couldn't relate as well, his mind a treasure-trove of outlets all on its own. She had said something about how only getting three lousy channels certainly didn't help things.

She hadn't realized it at the time, but looking back she knew he had immediately stopped what he was working on and began working on something new. She had no idea it was to appease a wish she had mentioned simply on a whim and couldn't help but be flattered that he had done it for her with such immediacy, making it easier to put aside her current predicament for the moment.

Coming up behind the couch, she gave him a hug around the neck and kissed the top of his dome. "Donnie, you're just the best!" she exclaimed.

He blushed deeply and made room beside him on the couch, which she gladly accepted, carefully not looking at Raphael and hoping she didn't look as awkward as she felt to have him sitting on her other side. She saw Casey fuming, arms crossed over his chest, but was too distracted by her own concerns to care about their silly feud at the moment. She stole another glance at Raph out of her peripheral vision only to find him still staring intently at the screen. His posture felt tight to her, particularly given their close proximity.

"So what do we get?" she asked, focusing on Donnie and trying to sound as excited as she should given the good news.

"Practically anything!" Donnie answered, thrilled at the attention he was receiving. "… Honestly, it's too much…"

"I've been flipping channels forever and I still haven't made it all the way around," Raphael finally commented bluntly. She assumed he did so mostly because it felt unnatural to continue sitting there without acknowledging anyone around him, but it came out forced and irritable. "Most of these aren't even in English."

Donnie rolled his eyes heavily in a manner that suggested nothing he did was ever good enough.

"Wow, really?" she added lightly, trying to lower the tension in the room, though she might have been the only one who felt it.

"The system I have in place will basically pick up any signal being beamed down," Don elaborated, pointing above to indicate satellites orbiting overhead. "Barring weather or obstructions of course."

At that point, she realized how uncharacteristically quiet Mikey was being, sitting alone on the floor, his shell propped against the couch near her feet. She patted him on the head. "Everything okay, Mikey?" she asked and she felt everyone around her grow rigid, a quiet tension filling the room.

"What did you guys do to him?" she demanded.

"Nothing!" Donnie answered quickly, wanting to remain in her good graces. "It's just-"

"Donnie wasn't kidding when he said we get practically everything," Casey finished for him, smirk sidling up his face. "Just so you know."

Mikey looked up at her with a scarred expression, his baby blue eyes wide and haunted. "I saw *things*," he croaked.

"Jesus Christ!" April exclaimed, scrambling off the couch and to his side. She hugged his head to her chest and stroked his cheek and he whimpered against her breast. "What the hell is *wrong* with all of you?!"

"It wasn't intentional," Don murmured, embarrassed.

"I didn't linger," Raph said defensively. "…Much," he added, a sly smile crossing his face, sending Casey into a fit of laughter.

"It's not funny!" April barked and punched Raph in the leg for good measure, partially because she felt it warranted and partially because she thought it best to take the first opportunity given to her to address him directly, no matter the reason. He barely flinched, but his jaw tightened and his gaze fixed fiercely on the screen once more.

A brightness flashed across the screen as Raphael continued to cycle through the channels, accompanied with a flare of dramatic music. It was enough to snap Mikey out of her arms, instinctively drawn to the familiar sights and sounds of a cartoon. The channel changed again.

"HEY!" Mikey protested. "I was watching that!"

"I'm not watching a cartoon," Raph sneered.

Mikey immediately returned to a wounded state as he nuzzled against her neck with a small whimper.

"Change it back," she directed.

"Why should I?" Raph demanded, scowling. "He gets free reign over the TV more than anyone!"

"Maybe because you've scarred him for life," she snapped.

"*I've* scarred him-," he began, indignantly. "*He's* the one that got you the free porn." He pointed a large finger accusingly at his brother.

"Yeah, thanks D," Casey added lightly with a smile, aware of the mounting tension in the room but seemingly unconcerned about it. "Very cool of you."

"I can't help what's being broadcast!" Donnie asserted. "I was just trying-"

"Oh, for god's sake! That's enough! All of you!" April exclaimed, before she regarded Raphael directly, making eye contact with him for the first time since she'd come downstairs. For the first time, since she'd totally embarrassed herself yesterday morning. "You're just flipping channels aimlessly. He already knows what he wants to watch," she insisted. "What's the big deal?"

He glared at her defiantly and she sensed it had to with something more than a simple argument over programming choices. "Fine," he finally replied with a dark, even tone, tossing the remote down at his younger brother's feet. "Give the baby his bottle." He rose to his feet, his mass imposing as he towered above her where she sat on the floor. She held his gaze nonetheless, refusing to be intimidated before he stomped upstairs and slammed the bathroom door.

There was a moment of strained silence in the house before Mikey dived on the remote and switched it back to the previous channel. Vaguely April was aware that a commercial for the upcoming cartoon was airing: *Coming up next - Crognard the Barbarian!*

"This looks awesome!" Michelangelo enthused as April began to think that maybe she should have let that one go. The cartoon looked bad enough - but she already had her work cut out for her where smoothing things over with Raphael was concerned without adding to it.

Everyone – except Michelangelo, who remained rapturously glued to the screen - had gone their separate ways not long after, the uncomfortably thick tension in the room refusing to dissipate. At least, she assumed that was the reason. She had certainly felt it profoundly.

She ended up having lunch with Donnie and asking him to expound on how he had managed the feat with the television. She didn't understand half of it, but it made him happy and she knew there was little enough she could do to show gratitude for his efforts. Guiltily, she was aware of paying him less than sufficient attention though - her mind continuously wandering to dwell on the awkwardness that she knew lay ahead of her that day. She only hoped he didn't notice whenever she felt her mind drifting off.

Eventually, Don had made his way back to the barn and she found herself cleaning the kitchen meticulously. It had begun simply enough, with her taking care of the dishes after lunch. But afterwards she had decided the fridge needed to be cleaned out, then the microwave scrubbed, and next thing she knew she was doing the same to the inside of the oven. She didn't even try to fool herself as to why. She knew a stalling tactic when she was in the middle of it.

Finally, she grabbed the Monopoly box, forced herself to walk upstairs, and timidly knocked on the bathroom door.

"Yeah?" came Raph's voice tersely from within.

"Hey," she replied as casually as possible, stepping inside and plopping onto her beanbag as she started to set up the board game.

He gave her a bewildered look. She caught it out of the corner of her eye and could feel it growing stronger with each passing second, though she pretended not to notice. When that didn't get him the desired result, he finally said, "I'm not in the mood for company."

"Yeah, I know," she replied, voice full of understanding, but continued to sort the colorful paper money into proper piles.

He continued staring at her for a few moments and she knew he had no idea what he was supposed to be doing. Part of her wanted to give him what he wanted and leave, ending this uncomfortable exchange for both of them. But she knew doing so would ultimately only make things worse.

"Maybe you didn't hear me-" he began, before she cut him off.

"Raph just-" she started and could hear the irritation in her voice. She tossed her head and tried again, looking away from him this time, focusing her eyes on the board. "Come and play this stupid game with me before I make you be the boot."

His prolonged silence prompted her to look at him again. "Just trust me on this, okay?" she insisted earnestly.

"I want to be the racecar," he finally said, positioning himself on the opposite side of the game board.

"No kidding," she replied, with a sarcastic air. "I would've pegged you for a thimble guy."

He smirked at that and the gesture relaxed her somewhat. Enough that she thought she might be able to get through this after all.

They had been playing for what had felt like a good chunk of time to him without addressing the elephant in the room. He had forgotten how long it took to play a round of Monopoly, particularly with only two people, neither willing to budge to the other. He wondered if she hadn't chosen the game purposefully for that reason. Regardless, he was relieved that she seemed disinclined to bring up anything pertaining to what had passed between them yesterday.

"I'd forgotten how hard it is to play this game with two people," she commented and he couldn't help but wonder just how well she could get into someone's head. Did she just pick up things randomly? Did she even realize she was doing it? What else could she sense rolling around in his head?

"Maybe we should have asked Mikey to join us," she added, unaware of his train of thought. Her tone was so light and unassuming that he decided the comment had probably just been a coincidence and he was just being paranoid. They both seemed to have found themselves in a stalemate. Why wouldn't the same thing have occurred to her?

"Don't know if he has the attention span," he replied, glad for the small talk. He still wasn't sure why this had been so important to her, but it wasn't as uncomfortable as it could have been, aside from the fact that they were avoiding eye contact. Well, he was at least; he couldn't be sure about her as he only allowed himself to steal quick, occasional glances at her, afraid that anything more might lead to a heavier conversation.

"You have a point," she admitted with a smile, but then the air about her changed, her posture more rigid and a hint of determination flashed across her face. He knew the small talk was over and braced himself.

"Sorry I didn't show up for training this morning," she offered. Her tone sounded as if she had merely slept in and that grated at him for some reason.

"Don't worry about it," he said automatically, as though his body was trying to get this over with before his mind could process it.

"But I'll be there tomorrow," she continued. Her voice remained casual, but he could feel her looking at him intently, watching for his reaction. He kept his gaze on the board in front of him, unsure how to respond.

The silence that followed must have been prolonged enough to worry her because she had reached across the board and grasped his hand gently. "This doesn't have to be weird," she said soberly.

It wasn't weird until now, he thought bitterly, which wasn't entirely true. Spending time with her that afternoon hadn't been what he'd call comfortable, but it was only compounding now. His hand remained stiff under hers and he felt the rising urge to yank it away – her touch felt like a brand from yesterday.

She pulled away from him almost as soon as he had thought it. He glanced up long enough to see that she was smiling at him warmly, looking relatively nonchalant given the situation and that irritated him all the more.

"Everyone goes through this sort of thing, at one time or another," she continued, returning her attention to the board game and rolling the dice. "It's no big deal."

No big deal! He fought the grimace that threatened to cross his face. How could she say that? How could she think it? At the moment, he was having a hard time thinking of a single event in his life that had been more impactful. And here she was treating it like it was nothing. Maybe it *was* nothing… to her.

"I just don't want things strained between us," she explained, perhaps seeing a glimmer of the distress he was feeling, but misinterpreting it. "There's no reason for anything to be any different."

He knew she expected him to respond in some manner, but he honestly didn't know how to. No matter what she'd said, he couldn't see how things could possibly be the same between them. Hell, he could barely bring himself to look at her! He had to fight the urge to lash out at her. It wasn't warranted, nor would it help them in the long run, but it would end this awkward and decidedly one-sided conversation. But she hadn't given him an opening. What was he supposed to do? Get pissed off because she was being so painfully understanding - reaching out to him?

"And I really want to get back to training again tomorrow," she added, probably because he still hadn't said anything.

"Works for me," he managed to reply in a tone that he hoped matched her nonchalance to some degree, though he didn't feel in the least bit nonchalant. If today was any indicator, he was quite convinced he didn't want to be alone with her ever again unless absolutely necessary. Unfortunately, it was the only thing he could come up with to make the exchange end. If he had said no, she surely would have argued; she was that damn stubborn.

"Good," she sighed. "I'm glad that's settled." Her voice sounded genuinely relieved, in stark contrast to his mood. She happily sunk deeper into her beanbag, clearly feeling the matter was dealt with.

He, on the other hand, did everything in his power to finish their game as quickly as possible - while still striving to make it look like he wasn't just handing her the win. All the while, he had to try to decipher her continued small talk, little of which he was actually processing. Hopefully he was nodding and grunting at the right times.

She had to have noticed on some level how awkward he felt, how distant he was making himself, but she gave no indication. Perhaps she thought if she continued powering through, he'd eventually come around. But when she'd won, the typical smack talk didn't follow, and he figured she knew what he was up to all along after all. Still she went about with business as usual, putting away the game pieces and mercifully making to leave.

He was worried that she'd have some parting words relating to their situation, but all she offered was, "see you at dinner."

He finally allowed himself a breathy exhale after he heard her descending the stairs, then slumped across the beanbag like he'd just survived taking on an army of Foot soldiers single-handedly. He turned his head toward Leonardo. "Wanna switch places?" After a few silent moments he sighed. "Yeah, I didn't think so."

"RAPH! DINNER!" he heard Mikey yell for him below, followed by pieces of an argument having something to do with if they'd wanted him to shout for Raph, they could have done that without his help. Not long after Mikey had appeared in the doorway, repeating the message.

"Not hungry," Raph muttered, without turning to acknowledge him further.

"Dude," Mikey began, sensing his mood. "This isn't about the TV still is it? You can have the remote while we eat."

"I'm not hungry," he repeated darkly.

"Fine. Be that way," Mikey shrugged, leaving him alone once more.

Truth was he hadn't eaten at all that day. Memories of the day before had made the thought of stomaching anything seem impossible that morning and then he'd stomped up to Leo's side and barricaded himself there the rest of the day. Come to think of it, he hadn't eaten all yesterday either, aside from that breakfast April had packed for them.

He was just thinking about how he planned to raid the kitchen after everyone was asleep when Mikey reappeared, looking apprehensive this time around.

"April says you need to come down to eat," he said, awkwardly. "I think you should. She has *that* tone."

Just then April's voice chimed in loudly from downstairs. "I know Raphael didn't have me cook this for everyone without telling me he had no intention of eating!"

"I told you," Mikey murmured apologetically. He looked relieved when Raph sighed and made to follow him downstairs.

He spitefully plopped down on the couch with every intention of showing just how 'not hungry' he was. Before he knew it, Donnie had escorted April to the couch as well, gallantly offering to serve her. Silently, he fumed all the more and had no doubt that everyone could sense his dark mood, not that he gave half a damn.

"Here bro," Mikey offered him the remote with a cautious smile.

"I don't fucking care about the TV!" he barked, paying no mind to the glare April shot his way.

"Great," Casey casually passed them with a plate in hand, snatching up the remote from Mikey, before finding a seat between him and April.

Raph had to fight back the smirk that threatened to cross his face, picturing Donnie making April a plate only for his place next to her to be taken by Casey. Unfortunately he didn't stay satisfied long; the smells coming from the kitchen were beginning to get to him. He'd gone too long without food and was beginning to wonder if hunger was going to beat out his stubbornness.

Donnie returned from the kitchen, two plates in hand, and April went to meet him, probably picking up on the same issue Raph had. They both found a place on the floor together instead and Casey decided to take up more room on the couch before settling on what appeared to be a cheesy horror movie.

Raph felt himself sneer as he watched April place an affectionate hand on Donnie's shoulder, before she accepted the plate he had made for her. She hadn't said anything about the fact he hadn't gotten anything to eat. Not that it surprised him; he knew her insistence had nothing to do with food and everything to do with forcing him to socialize. But when April grabbed Don's arm at a jump-scare, he wondered if there wasn't another reason altogether. He glanced at Casey and couldn't figure out why he hadn't noticed what was so obvious to him. He turned his attention back to April who was still clutching at Donnie's bicep as his brother smiled down at her indulgently.

Raph grit his teeth and headed for the kitchen. He couldn't endure April and his brother fawning all over each other one second more. And, to his mind at least, that was a good enough reason to forget his stubbornness and give into his increasingly demanding stomach. He returned to his seat and attacked the food in front of him more aggressively than necessary. Not that anyone seemed to notice - and that only bothered him even more.

He watched as April whispered something to Donnie, both of them laughing quietly together.

"This movie is stupid," Raph finally spoke up.

"Well, yeah," Casey agreed. "That's kinda the point. Besides, you said you didn't care."

"No one is making you watch it," April added tersely.

"Funny, I seem to remember being forced to come down here," he returned.

"All I said was that you needed to eat," April replied evenly. "Excuse me for caring about your well-being."

"Maybe I'll just take my food and leave then!" he shot back, already on his feet. He didn't wait for a response as he began to ascend the stairs, which was just as well because no one tried to stop him. He couldn't help but bitterly reflect that if it had been Donnie who had stormed out, April probably would've gone after him.

He had cleaned his plate in record time despite his mood and the fact that he was dreading tomorrow morning. He spent the next couple of hours trying to convince himself that after the night's events she'd probably not show up for training after all. Maybe he'd be able to avoid her for a while. Long enough for things to cool off anyway.

"We need to talk," he heard her voice come from the door frame, so lost in thought he hadn't heard her approach.

"I don't want to talk," he growled in frustration, still seated on the stool and keeping his back to her.

"Raph, believe it or not, I'd be more than willing to let you work this out your way, if that's what you need, but I'm not going to sit back and watch you mistreat the others because of something stupid I did. And I've done everything I can think of to make this as easy for you as possible," she pointed out. "What can I do to convince you that this is no big deal?"

"There you go again!" he blurted out, turning to face her. "How is this not a big deal?!" He glared at her as though challenging her to come up with a valid response to his righteous indignation.

He felt some satisfaction that she genuinely seemed stumped at his response, freezing for a moment to consider his words. "…You do understand that I was the one turned down, right?" she eventually began cautiously. "Do you *want* this to be a big deal for me?"

"No!" he admitted harshly, tearing his eyes away from her. He wasn't sure how he had wanted this confrontation to go, but this wasn't it. Why did she have to be so fucking reasonable?

"Good," she replied, stiffly. "Because that would be a real dick move on your part."

He could sense that her patience was beginning to wear thin.

"Just…forget it," he breathed in exasperation. He pivoted on the stool, turning his back to her once more and waving her off with one hand. Of course nothing he said or did was making sense to her. Why would it? And there was no way for him to explain it to her.

"No, I will not forget it," she persisted. "In case you haven't noticed, we live together. You're going to explain to me why you're acting this way, whether you like it or not."

He rose to his feet violently and faced her again, fully pissed that she wouldn't let it go and unable to stop himself from just letting her have it. "And what the fuck was up with your

hands all over Donnie tonight? Are you *trying* to get at me?"

If anything, she looked even more perplexed than she had at the beginning of the conversation, her face screwed into a look of complete confusion as she tried to piece together what he was saying.

"What the absolute *hell* are you talking about!" she spat, throwing up her hands. "You know what? Don't answer that. It'll only piss me off." She was madder than he'd ever seen her before, which suited him fine. With any luck she'd storm off in the next few seconds and he wouldn't have to worry about tomorrow morning after all.

"I will tell you this much, Raphael," she started, positively livid. Her eyes met his, flashing with anger, one of her fingers pressed accusingly against his plastron. "I'm not treating anyone any differently than I ever have. If you've suddenly decided to become fixated on my every movement, that's not on me."

He wasn't sure how to reply to that, which seemed often to be the case whenever they had a confrontation. It was infuriating. He held her glare and matched it with one of his own, hoping the part where she'd stomp off was fast approaching.

"And, more to the point," she continued, much to his unending frustration. "Why on earth do you even care?! …Unless…"

And just like that he realized his mistake. April's face suddenly softened with understanding and he knew his eyes had betrayed him. Why had he said anything? Why wasn't he capable of pretending everything was fine like she had wanted?

"This is about Donnie, isn't it?" she asked, knowingly.

He once again was unable to look at her and found himself focusing on a random spot on the floor. "He's my brother," he mumbled.

Her shoulders fell as her posture immediately relaxed. "For god's sake, Raphael, why didn't you just say so?" she sighed in relief.

He managed to shrug indeterminately.

"Raph, I would never ever think of coming between you and your brothers." She lightly placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "I understand completely."

He gave her a perplexed look. "Didn't it occur to you-"

"I only told you how I felt," she interrupted him. "I didn't even know how you'd respond, much less where to go from there. Figured we'd cross that bridge when we came to it."

There was an awkward moment of silence between them before he asked, "So what now?"

"Now? Nothing, I guess," she shrugged. "I just wanted to see where things would go and here we are. Honestly, Raph, if you'd only said this from the beginning we'd have sorted this all out yesterday," she chided him with a smile and a shake of the head.

It felt odd to him, having it all out there and doing nothing, but he didn't have another answer. It was bothersome how easily she seemed capable of shrugging it off, but he supposed that was unfair giving that his decision was the determining factor. And he couldn't quite stop himself from wondering what they'd be doing right now if he'd made a different decision.

April looked at him searchingly, her expression gentle, the patient smile never faltering. She was always like that, ready to wait quietly and comfort; it came so naturally for her. "You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," he managed to smile at her weakly. "Sorry I've been an ass."

"It's okay," she replied amicably. "At least I understand why now. Next time, just talk to me."

He rubbed the back of his neck absently. "I'm not so good with that. The talking thing."

"I've noticed," she chuckled. "See you tomorrow morning?"

"Definitely," he agreed with confidence, finally able to look her in the eye.

She nodded happily, and turned to leave before pausing at the door. "Raph, before I go-" she stopped, considering her words carefully. "I respect your decision, but you need to know, this isn't going to change the way I feel about your brother. You aren't doing anyone any favors." She briefly waited for him to respond in some way. When he didn't, she finished with, "Just thought you should know" and then she was gone.

"Your feet," he reminded her.

April cringed slightly in equal part embarrassment and frustration, doing a quick shuffle to correct her mistake.

They continued circling one another at distance in the barn. Cracks of light played through the wood of the eastern wall with early morning sun. They hadn't tried sparring since she was injured during the last attempt and it showed in her timidity. He knew her well enough to be sure it had less to do with worrying about getting hurt again, and more to do with second-guessing herself.

"You going to make a move or what?" he asked with a touch of annoyance, intending to provoke her.

It did the trick as the look of uncertainty on her face hardened into one of determination. She lunged at him swiftly. He evaded her attack with ease, but to her credit she managed to dodge his take down attempt.

"Good," he encouraged and her face brightened in response.

They resumed circling again, April with an added bounce in her step. "Feet," he reminded her once again, draining the cockiness out of her as she hurried to correct herself.

He hadn't intended to begin a sparring session with her that morning. Not until he saw her and felt all his frustrations welling up inside him once more. She'd put on a faded t-shirt from a box of old clothes her parents had left, though it was a couple sizes too big and the thin material hung off her tiny frame awkwardly. Under it she wore black leggings and Raph had to tear his eyes away from where they hugged her ass perfectly. He wished it could be as easy for him to forget everything that had transpired between them as it seemed to be for her.

And somehow he had decided that sparring would help move things along. In retrospect, he wasn't sure why. It wasn't like he was getting much out of it, unable to be the aggressor. But at least it was keeping them from talking. The last thing he wanted was another discussion about shit they couldn't do anything about.

His mind lingered on these thoughts, not as focused as he should be, and she grew more confident and aggressive with her attacks until he abruptly found his eyes drawn to the same damn thing he'd been on her back about from the beginning. It wasn't like he had anything to worry about, but he wasn't doing her any favors with his inattention - how long had she been crossing her feet again?

"Feet!" he barked and this time she groaned in frustration in a manner that suggested he shouldn't be making such a big deal about it.

That gave him all the focus he needed. He stopped correcting her and they resumed going through the motions again, him remaining defensive until he felt like she was getting plenty cocky again. Then, with the slightest of effort, he had her abruptly on her back and pinned to the ground.

"What do you do?" he prompted.

She managed to give him the barest of tap outs, wide-eyed with shock and seemingly holding her breath.

"Knocked the wind out of you?" he asked, and even though he knew she wasn't hurt, the impulse to comfort her was difficult to resist. Geeze, was this how Donnie felt?

She nodded slightly with a faint wheeze as she struggled to get air.

He watched as life began to return to her face, her skin regaining color, the bright blue of her eyes reviving, her chest exaggeratedly moving up and down against his plastron desperate for oxygen. He felt something inside him stir and froze, realizing he was quickly finding himself in a compromising position. He tightened his thighs and wished he had a god to pray to, alarm rapidly gathering in his chest.

"Crossing my feet makes it easy for me to be thrown off balance," she regurgitated for him in monotone as though that's why he hadn't moved yet. He barely registered the words.

"Raph?" she asked in concern and it occurred to him that she probably saw the panic in his eyes.

He clenched his eyes closed and desperately tried to think of anything besides how wonderful she felt pressed against him. Leo's condition. Mikey's ridiculous underwear collection. Donnie's stupid face! Anything but her.

But just as he began to relax, suddenly he felt her lips pressed against his. His eyes flew open in confusion, too taken aback to return the gesture.

Just as abruptly, she broke the kiss and rested her head against the ground once more and he knew he had to be giving her the most dumbfounded look and somehow he still couldn't do a damn thing. "Wait," she paused thoughtfully and he felt himself holding his breath, unsure of what was coming next, his mouth still tingling where her lips had pressed. "No, civilization didn't crumble; I think we're okay," she teased, probably for his benefit given he was rigid as a rock. Or maybe she felt just as awkward?

He wanted to retort with something snarky. Knew he should, if he wanted to maintain any kind of cred at all. But his mouth was dry and his mind was blank.

"Wouldn't hurt to double check though," she hinted and he realized that, like an idiot, he still hadn't gotten off of her.

"No one's here," she giggled, and it was only then that he realized he was looking around for non-existent prying eyes.

As inviting as her words were and enticing as she felt, he still couldn't bring himself to dare do as she suggested. Instead, he felt her hands wrap around his neck, prompting him down towards her. He didn't fight it and this time around when their lips met he pressed back as intently as she did.

After a few delirious moments, he pulled back to look at her once again, scarcely able to believe that she was really there and this was really happening.

"There now, that wasn't so bad, was it?" she asked, coyly, and he saw that her cheeks were flushed beneath her freckles.

Quite the opposite, he'd never felt anything more incredible. The kiss itself – but even more than that was simply the fact that she wanted to. That she had. He didn't have words to describe how much it meant to him. But words were never his strong suit.

All he managed instead was to chuff, "Naw" while smiling dopily at her.

"C'mon, big guy," she prompted, and now she was beaming at him, her eyes bright with triumph and delight. "You can help me check the chicken coop."

He finally got off of her and she took him by the hand. He held it back, craving her touch. Funny, how even the slight warmth of that little hand made him feel. But as she led him out of the barn into the wide expanse of the yard, he suddenly felt exposed and couldn't help glancing edgily around to where the house silently watched them. It didn't matter that no one else was awake yet, reality crashed on him in an instant, knowing that this new turn of events was just the start of a load of all new problems.

Instead of doing what should have been instinctive, he felt himself grasp her hand all the tighter.

Chapter 7

Raphael sat solemnly over Leonardo, feeling uncharacteristically anxious. He had watched April that morning after they had left the barn, practically entranced by her upbeat demeanor. She seemed unnervingly oblivious to the shit-storm he felt sure they were walking into.

He, on the other hand, was all too aware of it.

She had gone about collecting the eggs from the coop, happily talking about something he hadn't paid attention to, still too caught up in a wave of euphoria and disbelief. She'd taken his hand as they walked toward the house once more and again he had felt as though it were watching them, but nothing seemed to faze her at all; she had practically skipped beside him.

But once they had reached the side door leading into the kitchen, she had released his hand and honestly hadn't acknowledged him much since, making him wonder if she was more aware than she was letting on.

She had set about the kitchen, pulling out various ingredients and a mixing bowl, and it occurred to him that maybe she had been talking to him about breakfast earlier, when Casey excitedly burst through the door chanting under his breath, "Late, late, late, late." He froze awkwardly upon seeing the two of them and Raph suspected he wasn't sure if he was supposed to be so obvious about the occasional odd jobs he'd picked up.

"Where you off to today?" April asked, lightly, inviting the conversation easily as only she had a way of doing.

"Uh, just fixing a fence off at the Jefferson's place," he answered, posture relaxing. "It's no big deal, except it's taking a few days to finish."

"I'd imagine so," April replied, as she strained on her tip-toes to reach something in the high cabinetry. "They have a lot of land."

"Yeah, and I was supposed to be there, like, yesterday," he elaborated, grabbing an apple from the fridge.

Raphael felt like a third wheel in the conversation - not to mention he couldn't believe how naturally they were talking despite what had just occurred. His world felt forever changed, and it didn't make sense that it should only be that way for him.

"Let me get that for you, Red," Casey offered as she had begun climbing onto the countertop. Raph squeezed his eyes closed, embarrassed. He could have done that. He should have done that.

"Waffles?!" Casey exclaimed, looking at the waffle iron April had been trying to reach. "You would be making waffles when I have to leave," he added with a pout.

"Them's the breaks," she teased, jostling him playfully with her shoulder.

“S’okay, I’m sure I can come up with a way for you to make it up to me,” he returned suggestively with a wink, taking a bite out of the apple.

Raph felt himself tense instantly at this blatant flirtation, subconsciously clenching his fists. But April had only rolled her eyes, practically ignoring the comment altogether.

“See you guys later,” Casey threw over his shoulder, taking another bite as he walked out the door and they were left alone again.

April began mixing the batter and regarded Raphael briefly with a tilt of the head. “Breathe,” she suggested teasingly.

He inhaled deeply. His chest was tight as though he’d been holding his breath throughout the entire exchange, though hadn’t been aware of it until she’d said something. He walked past her silently, feeling confused. Confused about her lack of reaction to anything, as though it were business as usual. Confused about how he was supposed to behave now. Confused that any of this was happening to him in the first place.

“Say hi to Leo for me,” she called after him. “But don’t be forever, this won’t take long. I’m going to wake the others shortly too. I’m sure they won’t mind getting up for waffles.”

“I’m in way over my head,” he confided to his unconscious brother after he had mentally recounted the events of the morning. It occurred to him that he could share more; it wasn’t like Leo’d ever know, and who the hell else could he talk to about it anyway? But one look at Leo’s face made spilling his guts feel unnatural all the same.

She was going to wake the others soon…going to wake Donnie soon. And somehow she expected them all to have breakfast together as though nothing had happened.

He’d gotten lucky with Casey, him being too busy on his way out the door to pay him much mind. Not that he was as worried about him. Casey wasn’t exactly what you’d call perceptive. But Donnie…he’d know. Raph felt it in his bones, knew he’d be wearing it all over his face, and Donnie would just know. At least know something was up.

“Way, way over my head,” he repeated in a hushed tone, forcibly rubbing his hand over his scalp.

The stark quiet of the house was suddenly broken as he heard Mikey barreling down the stairs, exclaiming, “WAFFLES!” at the top of his lungs.

“Apparently, April’s made waffles,” came Donatello’s tired voice unexpectedly from the doorframe. “Yay,” he added with a touch of sarcasm and a yawn.

Raph remained still and silent, not trusting himself to properly respond. But Don merely yawned again and muttered, “Coffee. Need coffee.” Then he plodded away, continuing down the hall once more.
He contemplated just staying put. Why would anyone care whether he was there or not? But he didn’t want to risk a repeat of last night, when he had uncomfortably felt the center of attention. So instead he grit his teeth and forced himself out of the bathroom, aiming to just

get it over with. Power through before Donnie inevitably retreated to his workshop in the barn.

The old stairs creaked underneath his feet as he descended and, in his anxious state, it felt conspicuously loud, as though he were alerting the entire household to his presence with each step. But he found the three of them already situated around the television, paying him little mind, Mikey on the floor, with Donnie and April on the couch, leaving room for him to sit on the other side of her. It was
like they had fucking arranged seating at this point.

“There’s a plate for you on the kitchen counter. I didn’t put any toppings on it though. Don’t know how much syrup you take,” April called over her shoulder at him. It was a good thing he had decided to come down then. She would have definitely been shouting for him at some point.

He found some relief inside the kitchen, away from prying eyes. As he spread butter over the golden waffle, he considered just taking the plate with him back upstairs. His brothers would just assume he hadn’t cooled off from yesterday yet. Wouldn’t be the first time.

“Where the hell’s the syrup?” he barked from behind the door.

“Got it in here, bro,” Mikey called back happily with a mouth full of food.

He sighed and reentered the living room, to find the bottle of syrup being passed amongst them. He was trapped…unless he wanted a dry, flavorless waffle.

Eyeing the spot that had been left for him on the couch, the spot he usually occupied, he made a swift decision and sat in the armchair instead. No reason to compound the already awkward situation. Even if he was the only one who seemed to notice. Mikey tossed him the bottle of maple syrup and he tried to focus his attention on the television, only to find it tuned into another stupid cartoon.

“What time did you go to sleep last night,” April giggled knowingly at Don’s tired expression.

“Who knows,” he answered. “Too late for all this.” He took another sip from his coffee mug before hastily adding, “Not that I don’t appreciate it.”

April shook her head absently in a manner that suggested she hadn’t been bothered by the comment at all. “Just didn’t think you’d want to be left out is all,” she replied. “It was a last minute decision, I admit.”

Raph couldn’t help but eye them with quick glances. His brother was becoming more alert through the conversation, he was dismayed to notice. Drowsy Donnie would have been much easier to deal with.

“You’ve been getting up pretty early these days, haven’t you?” Donnie turned the question on her this time and Raph found himself swallowing hard.

“Yeah, I have,” she answered lightly. “For a few weeks now. It seems to have put me in a better mood, so I decided to keep it up.”

It was a vague answer, Raph knew, but the truth. Still, Don was good at piecing things together and it’d only be a matter of time before –

“What?” Donnie demanded of him, breaking his train of thought.

“What, what?” Raph snapped back, but knew he had unconsciously let his gaze settle on him for too long.

“You keep looking at me,” Donnie elaborated with an exaggerated gesture, “So, I repeat, what?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Raph snarled, making a point to focus on his plate instead, taking another bite before muttering under his breath, “I’m not being weird.”

“Who said anything about being weird?” Don insisted with growing irritation.

Definitely should have just gone with the dry waffle.

“I think you’re both weird,” Mikey chimed in helpfully as he added another large helping of syrup to his plate.

“Oh, Don!” April broke in excitedly and Raph was relieved that Don had returned his focus to her. “I forgot to tell you! Casey found the local junkyard and said that it looked like it might have some choice stuff.”

“Really?” Donnie replied enthusiastically. “Like what?”

“C’mon, Don, it’s Casey, like he’d know what you’d be looking for,” she offered with an eye roll, prompting them both to laugh.

Raph slowly realized that not only had April distracted the conversation away from him but did so in a way that both focused on his brother’s interests and played him up against his rival, ensuring his total attention.

“Seriously though, do you think he’d take me?” Donnie asked with a barely contained smile.

“I’m sure he would if you asked him nicely,” April teased.

“Hmmm…” he considered carefully. “Not sure if it’s worth all that,” he quipped finally and they laughed once more before April noticed Mikey going for the bottle of syrup again.

“Geez, Mikey! Want some waffle with that syrup?” she asked, aghast.

“Please, if you guys weren’t in here, I’d be chugging it straight from the bottle,” he admitted.

And just like that, Raph realized he’d been completely forgotten.

Not long after, Donnie had retreated to the barn again and April had returned once more to the kitchen with a stack of dishes. Raph hadn't even realized she had taken his, still awestruck at how expertly April had maneuvered the conversation away from him.

Of course, he knew it didn't change anything in the long run. And it was only a matter of time before he did something stupid again. He decided his only course of action was to have it out with April, uncomfortable though it would be. Maybe it wouldn't be so hard if she at least acted like she was even a little concerned.

He entered the kitchen, and immediately wished he hadn't. He had no idea how to even begin this conversation. Instead he found himself taking a position next to her in order to dry the dishes before she could ask what he was doing there.

"Someone's going to help me with the dishes?" she teased as she soaped up a plate and then rinsed it, sounding suitably aghast. "It must be my birthday."

He ignored the rub, intent on his reason for approaching her. Why had it fallen on him anyway? She'd always been so quick to try and find resolution before. Now her every mannerism suggested it was business as usual, when it was anything but.

"You going to take care of that or what?" she asked and he realized she had handed him a plate at some point and he was just standing there holding it like a dumbass.

He reached for the dish towel and started drying, which ended up being a nice excuse not to have to look at her. "So…" he began cautiously. "About today -"

"Knew there had to be a reason," she interrupted with a sigh, handing him another plate.

He shot her a glance out of the corner of his eye and saw she was smiling in a soft, knowing way and it made him feel as though she were actively trying to make this more difficult than it had to be.

"I'm serious," he bristled. "We need to talk."

"I don't want to talk," she growled in a deep voice, clearly mocking him from the night before.

He paused and obstinately regarded her with a tilt of the head. It had the opposite of the intended effect, sending her into a wave of hysterical laughter. He scowled and narrowed his eyes, desperately trying to decipher her baffling series of responses. It suddenly occurred to him that he probably didn't really understand girls, at least not in the context of…whatever they were now.

"Are you shitting me?" he finally managed to get in as her laughter began to subside.

"C'mon, Raph," she giggled. "I'm just in a good mood. Why aren't you?"

"What about all that shit you said last night?" he hissed, suddenly worried that they were going to be overheard by Mikey of all people. "About not coming between-"

“Oh no. No no no,” April countered immediately, all levity suddenly leaving her voice. “You are not pinning all that on me. You’re the one that wouldn’t get your big ass off me. Stop shooting me signals if you don’t want anything to happen. It takes two, Raphael.” She handed him another plate, more forcefully this time.

And just how the hell was he supposed to do that? Even so, he knew she had a point. He grimaced to have it thrown back in his face like that, like he didn’t feel guilty enough as is. “But…what about Donnie?”

April groaned, slumping forward and letting her hands hang limply in the dishwater as she looked imploringly up at the ceiling. “I was in a really good mood,” she whined. “And it’s been a really long time.”

He did know. He had felt the same way himself, wished he could have enjoyed their morning together longer, if he’d known how to. He was beginning to question whether he should have brought any of this up at all. It wasn’t getting them anywhere anyway. Then he heard April sigh, clearly resigned to having this conversation.

“What about Donnie, Raph?” she countered. “I’m not going to let him control my life. Are you?”

“…No,” he admitted defensively. “But-“

“Are you suggesting that we talk to him?” she asked. “What exactly do you want to tell him?”

“I don’t know,” he answered brusquely with growing agitation, the dishes clattered as he stacked another plate none too gingerly. Of course he didn’t. She had to know that. It wasn’t as though dealing with people and their feelings was his strong suit. That was her department.

“Neither do I,” she began. “Do you know why? Because I don’t know what this is yet,” she said, indicating the both of them with a soapy hand. “So why don’t we take some time to figure that part out first, before we cause a bunch of needless drama.”

She returned to her task in the sink. “And if it bothers you that much, it’s not like it ever has to happen again.”

He froze at that, it being the last thing he wanted to hear. “It doesn’t?” He strove to keep his voice even, his face guarded.

“No, it doesn’t,” she returned, somewhat snippy this time.

April pulled the stopper from the drain, the chore complete, and he knew he was quickly running out of time to hang over her. Whatever his conflict, he couldn’t leave things on a note of such finality. “But it could, right?” he found himself saying without thinking.

April gave a little smirk and threw a look over her shoulder, checking the kitchen door, through which they could still hear the sounds of Mikey’s cartoon. “It could,” she answered cheekily before leaning over and giving him another peck on the mouth to prove it and

briefly it was all he was aware of, all other concerns melting away. “If you stop being an idiot,” she clarified, shoving him playfully and snapping him back to reality.

Fat chance of that happening. All he’d felt like was an idiot ever since all this began, even more so now he was tingling all over from just the brief contact of her soft mouth on his. It wasn’t as though anything she was saying didn’t make sense, but he couldn’t help but feel that he was shouldering a burden alone. He found himself wishing she’d...freak out or something. Then it’d feel like someone was in this with him.

“So just, y’know, try to chill out,” she suggested, trying to regain a lighthearted tone.

Or she could at least give him some actual practical advice. “Yeah, I’ll just do that,” he replied bitterly, before he realized he was going to speak.

April sighed, leaning against the kitchen counter, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. “Stupid thing to say,” she breathed, mostly to herself before regarding him again. “Look Raph, I appreciate the position that you’re in. I really do. Believe it or not, I’m there with you. Though, admittedly, it’s not quite the same.”

“He’s not your brother,” he agreed pointedly.

“No, he’s not,” she conceded. “But I don’t think I’m wrong about not throwing everything out there either. We deserve some time to figure this out first, don’t you think? I mean, who knows, I may drive you crazy,” she added playfully.

The rigid exterior he’d been striving to maintain broke beneath the smirk he just couldn’t resist. “Too late,” he quipped.

“Haha,” she replied dryly. “What I’m saying is, there’s no point in getting the whole house in an uproar until we’re sure there’s a reason for it.”

He didn’t reply. Not because he didn’t agree, but because it just didn’t help. How was he supposed to act as though nothing was going on? He paused thoughtfully, before putting the remaining dishes away, unsure how to express this or if there was even any point in trying. It wouldn’t change anything.

“Do you think you can avoid him privately?” she asked, breaking his train of thought.

“What?”

“Do you think you can avoid being with Donnie alone?” she repeated. “I know you can’t avoid him altogether, but with the whole family I’ll be there to help.”

“Keep me from being a dumbass, you mean,” he muttered, remembering what had just gone down.

“Something like that,” she smiled.

That was the practical advice he was looking for. Should be easy, after all. They’d been keeping mostly to themselves ever since they’d arrived at the farmhouse anyway.

“I can do that,” he agreed, his eyes lingering on her coy smile. The one he’d seen her wear a couple of times and that somehow felt reserved for him. The one that seemed to precede physical contact and filled him with anticipation.

“Good,” April chirped. “Takes the pressure off.” She leaned toward him again and, for the first time, he knew what it had meant and was determined to not be such an idiot about it this time.

As her mouth met his once more, he was still really conflicted about a lot of things. Not the least of which being that April wanted to see where things were going, when he thought she’d been sure. She was the one that approached him after all. Not to mention, the one that had initiated every physical exchange. Not that he knew how these things were supposed to work. Hell, he had never given any of this shit a second thought before.

April wrapped her arms around his neck, this kiss lingering longer than the previous ones had. He cautiously placed his hands around her waist, unsure of anything he was doing, but striving to be a more active participant this time around. She pressed her body harder against his, so it must have been okay. He felt her soft lips slightly part over his lower lip and his breath hitched with the sensation of it. The last coherent thought he had was, *And screw Donnie anyway*. His grip instinctively tightened around her waist and she returned the gesture in kind around his neck.

He didn’t know what the hell he was doing. But April seemed like she did and maybe that was enough for now.

Chapter 8

Raphael lay awake on the futon, staring at the ceiling. It had become something of a ritual that week in the wee hours. He sighed and aimlessly glanced around the room he had chosen for himself upon their arrival at the farmhouse. It was on the first floor toward the back and didn't seem to have a definitive purpose; one wall lined with books was all that indicated that it may have been a study at one time.

In any case, there didn't seem much reason for anyone to venture into it, so it felt isolated somehow, and he hadn't felt like fighting over a room with a bed. Not that it had mattered much one way or the other. It seemed every room was designed to sleep someone, most of them holding rollaway beds or the fold-out couches.

April had explained that the house traditionally had been used as a place for her family to come together over reunions and so it needed to sleep as many as possible when they all congregated there over Thanksgivings and summers. She'd assured them though that they had nothing to worry about. That no one had been there in years. There'd been a melancholy tone to her voice, but he hadn't given it much thought. They had just arrived after the shit had hit the fan back home after all, so no one was in good spirits. But looking back, there was probably more going on there.

Nothing much went together in the room, which seemed true of the rest of the house as well. Comfort and utility were clearly more in mind. But there was a ton of dust-covered knickknacks crammed every which way. He imagined everyone from her large family brought a little something to the home over the years, leaving a little piece of them behind, be it intentionally or not.

He didn't typically notice such things, but lying there night after night left with nothing but your thoughts led you to pick up on things you normally wouldn't. So he'd find himself focusing on a particular item and wondering where it had come from. Tonight was a stuffed fish with a gaping mouth mounted on the wall. It didn't seem a big enough catch to warrant the production. Maybe a child had caught it and so a bigger deal was made of it. He had no idea what kind of fish it was. Donnie'd probably know.

He sighed again. Donnie was the reason he was still up, had been the past several nights. He'd like to say it was due to some moral dilemma, but the truth was far from that noble. April had been forgoing their usual afternoon visits. He figured she was overcompensating in the need to keep up appearances. But they had been getting together in the evenings.

When she'd first suggested they hang out late one night earlier that week, he'd agreed enthusiastically. Unfortunately, he'd had the rest of the day to think about it. If he were Donnie, he'd probably have spent the time elated and meticulously planning every detail. But he wasn't Donnie and all he knew how to do was brood about how clueless he was and that she was bound to tire of that pretty quickly.

Still, she had met with him in the living room around eleven that night and somehow made things feel absolutely natural. She'd already had a bucket of popcorn sat out and one of the VHS tapes she'd picked up at that yard sale ready to go. He had no idea what the movie was. Truthfully, it was the farthest thing from his mind. Once she had pressed play on the remote, she'd taken his arm and wrapped it around her, resting her head against his shoulder and propping her feet onto the couch. And all he could do was focus on the nearness of her, marvel at how easy it seemed for her as she absently reached for the popcorn bowl. He'd had the presence of mind at least to take the bowl from its spot on the coffee table and place it in his lap as it seemed to be a stretch for her. Or maybe he just didn't like the warmth of her body leaving his as she made for it. Maybe he wanted an excuse to have her reach towards him, again and again.

He'd spent the next half hour wondering if he was supposed to make a move of some sort and just how to go about it when they'd heard footsteps on the porch. April had immediately sprung up into a sitting position, distancing herself from him on the couch as Donnie walked in.

If he had been surprised to see them up that late, he hadn't given any indication. Instead, he simply took a seat with them and asked, "What're we watching?" while grabbing for what was left of the popcorn.

After that, her focus had been almost exclusively on Donnie. How could it not be? He made sure to monopolize her time whenever he was able. And Raph had understood why she was currently indulging him. He really had. Didn't make it any less irritating though.

He'd caught bits of the conversation. She'd made some comment that they were both having trouble sleeping, not that he had asked. Donnie talked to her so easily, he realized with envy. While they had hardly said two words to each other that night. It had gotten easier as they'd bonded in recent weeks. But the dynamic had changed and seemed to have set them back in the communication department.

And he couldn't even attempt to shift his focus to the movie - by that point it had been so deep into the plot there was no way he'd pick it up. Not that he really gave a damn. He'd become increasingly aware that she was sitting closer to Donnie than she had been to him.

He had been going to explode at any moment, which wasn't going to do him any favors in the long run. So instead, he had grit his teeth and excused himself to bed. April hadn't tried to stop him. He told himself there was no way she could really, but was positively livid that a night for them had turned into a date for his brother instead.

The following morning, she had apologized to him as they went through some katas.

"I really thought he'd be up later than that," she explained. "He usually is."

"You never can tell with Donnie," he shrugged, as though it were no big deal. "He keeps his own schedule."

"Problem is, Casey and Mikey aren't going to go to bed any earlier," she continued, trying to lead him to a conclusion she'd already come to.

It had left them with no choice but to wait for Donnie to finally give in to sleep and Raph knew his brother well enough to know that time could vary widely.

He looked at his phone, saw it was nearly half past one, and grumbled to himself.

Just then, he heard the front door open and close and the sound of his brother padding up the stairs to the room he'd chosen for himself near April's bedroom. That had been a surprise to no one. Raph forced himself to wait patiently another ten minutes, to make sure Donnie had really settled in, before getting up and heading into the living room.

He could see the faint glow from the television, the volume so low you could scarcely hear it even from the close proximity of the couch, and he knew she was already there, waiting for him as she had been the past few nights. A fact that never failed to astonish him. It meant that she had been doing the same as he had, restlessly waiting, listening intently, just as eager. He was particularly surprised given what he'd deemed to be a rather embarrassing display on his part the previous night.

She must have tired of waiting for him to initiate anything (something he still didn't have the first idea how to do) and had pulled him into a kiss last night. It was still new for him, her lips soft against his, the way it made his senses heighten, intensifying how she smelt and felt against him.

Then her lips had parted and he could feel her tongue graze his mouth. Looking back he'd probably responded a bit too enthusiastically, every part of him wanting to encourage her. He had opened his mouth instinctively to her advances and became acutely aware that his was much, much larger. Not to mention his tongue – a fact that was emphasized as it brushed against hers. Even as every new sensation brought him pleasure, with it was accompanied the reminder of how different they both were. And she had to be thinking the same thing: How different this was to all the other times she'd done it before. But she hadn't broken contact and instead of enjoying what should have been one of the most memorable events of his life, he found himself preoccupied with every movement he made. Hopefully it wouldn't be as awkward the next time around.

"Hey," he announced himself in a whisper, approaching the couch. Her head whipped around, brandishing a wide smile.

"Hey yourself. I was worried," she admitted as he took a seat next to her. "Thought you might've fallen asleep."

"You kiddin'? And miss all this? Not a chance." It was nice to think of something smooth to say for once and it seemed to have done the trick as she bowed her head bashfully before looking back at him and wrapping her arms around his neck and he knew there wasn't going to be any pretense of watching a movie that night.

He'd tried to push aside any insecurities, but it couldn't be helped. For the life of him, he didn't understand why she'd dive so quickly into a repeat of what he felt had to be a very awkward experience for her. Even as he'd figured out how to adjust his mouth against hers, even as they'd fallen into a rhythm, even as he heard a slight moan escape her-

He broke the kiss, abruptly pulling away in a manner too brusque to pretend that everything was okay.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. He felt her hands grip where they rested against his neck and shoulder, her eyes searching his face.

It was a fair question, but one too embarrassing to answer. Instead he huffed and rose to his feet. April bowed her head toward her lap and fixated on her hands, pulling on her fingers, fidgeting nervously. He’d seen her do this once before and realized he’d just made her feel as self-conscious about herself as he had been, which was the last thing he wanted.

He started to pace the space in front of the television. “You don’t have to act it up for me, April. It’s just-"

“What?” she interrupted. Her head shot up, her face scrunched in a questioning look.

“C’mon April, I get it, okay?” he continued, fighting to keep his voice at a whisper, still pacing back and forth and gesturing wildly with his hands. “You got more experience is all, alright?”

“What are you talking about?” she asked, her brow crinkling in confusion.

Why was she making this even more difficult than it already was? She had to know how embarrassing this was for him. He ran a hand forcibly down his scalp as he tried to come up with a way to respond.

“…What exactly do you think goes on in high school?” she asked, apparently picking up what he was trying to say during his silence.

He paused, shifted his body to face her and gave her a knowing look.

“It’s not like on TV, Raph,” she giggled. “You do realize that when we met I had just turned sixteen and I’ve spent basically every free moment since with you guys, right? This ‘experience’ you’re referring to doesn’t exist,” she finished, punctuating the sentence with air quotes.

“Oh,” he muttered, feeling rather stupid at his assumption. “In that case…nevermind.” He sheepishly returned to her side on the couch.

“There was one time,” she admitted, placing a comforting hand on top of his. “It was before I met you guys. Me and this boy had flirted some toward the end of middle school.” She cocked her head to the side, looking mildly embarrassed over the memory. “When we became freshmen I think we just felt all grown up, starting high school and everything. So one day he came to my house after school and we started making out because we were so much older now, right? It was totally awful,” she stated bluntly. “I made some excuse that my dad would be home soon to get him to leave and we never spoke to each other again. That’s the limit of my ‘experience’.”

He had listened intently to her story, especially noting how insecure she'd looked telling it. It wasn't something she showed much. "Who is this guy?" he demanded.

"His name was Tyler," she answered.

His eyes narrowed seriously. "I don't like him," he declared, definitively.

April instantly fell to her side on the couch in laughter. He shushed her while nodding toward the upper floor as a reminder why they needed to keep it down. She clamped a hand over her mouth, her body shaking and he couldn't help the smile that crept up his face. He loved seeing her like this, enveloped in joy, especially when he was the cause…even if had been unintentional.

"You don't even know him," she eventually argued, still snickering.

"Doesn't matter," he defended, playfully. "He's made the list."

She propped herself up on her elbows, looking up at him with mirthful eyes. "What? So just anyone named Tyler?"

"Figure I can narrow it down to all the Tylers in New York," he asserted, sensibly.

"Well, that's a lot more practical," she chuckled and allowed her head to plop back down to the couch cushion. She stared up at the ceiling, suddenly serious, prompting his smile to crack as he regarded her with concern.

"I was worried when you stopped-," she started and abruptly faded off. "He avoided me after that day," she added solemnly, eyes fixed to a vacant spot above. "I mean, to be fair, I was avoiding him too…but still, it's not like I had to try hard."

"Probably was just embarrassed about how much he sucked," Raph replied, hoping it would be enough to lift her spirits again.

It seemed to do the trick as her face brightened once more. "He really did," she sniggered.

"I-I don't, right?" he brought himself ask, seeing as they were on the subject this was going to be the easiest it was going to get. Somehow the darkness of the room made it easier. He sensed her crane her head up and he settled his gaze at his feet instead.

"Raph, you think I waited up all night and beat you to the living room because I haven't been enjoying myself?" she teased.

He couldn't have fought the arrogant smirk that sidled up his face at that, so he didn't try.

"Hey, don't go getting a big head," she kicked at him playfully. "We just established that I don't know what I'm talking about."

"You knew enough to show Tyler the door," he threw back, just as quickly.

She broke into laughter once more and, despite being glad that the reaction was intentional this time around, he couldn't help but train his senses to the second floor again. "April, ssssh!" he barked hoarsely. "You're gonna wake the whole house!"

"Make me," she dared with playful eyes, and something else flashed there indicating what she wanted, encouraging him to bow over her still reclined body. He pressed his mouth to hers and she hummed into it with delight, but almost as quickly he felt the corners of her mouth quirk up, felt her body vibrate below him. He pulled back again.

"What, so it's funny now?" he demanded, propping himself up on his forearms.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she tittered, her eyes watery. She flapped her hand toward her face as though it would help shake her case of the giggles. "I was just thinking about all the poor Tylers in New York who are going to get a roundhouse to the head and have no idea why," she finished with a squeak, fighting to get it out before she lost herself in merriment once more, biting on her knuckle.

He regarded her for a moment before erupting in a belly laugh of his own, deep and true. It was her turn to encourage him to quiet down, though she was doing a piss poor job of it in his opinion - she was having just as much trouble holding it together herself. It occurred to him the late hour and the lack of sleep they'd been getting probably wasn't helping things.

"Okay, okay," she wheezed, attempting to pull herself together with heavy breaths. "I'm okay."

Their breathing slowed together and their eyes locked. Suddenly their mouths were joined again. Their lips parted in unison and when their tongues met it elicited a sound from her that made his pulse race.

It was better, so much better once he stopped over thinking things. That he didn't have to have it all figured out, because neither did she. And, strangely, it felt normal in a way he had rarely experienced. As though they could be any other pair of teenagers on the planet doing the exact same thing in that moment.

Chapter 9

She blinked drowsily against the sunlight dappling through the trees, too high in the sky for the hour it should have been. The first thought that crossed her mind was that she hadn't intended to fall asleep. The next was that Raph must have done the same, his breathing came steady and slow from where her arm draped across his plastron.

They had returned that morning to her family's picnic spot by the stream. After eating, he had propped himself against a tree trunk and she had joined him in an unspoken agreement to rest their eyes. It shouldn't have been a surprise to either of them that they had fallen asleep, given the hours they'd been keeping.

She shifted against him, stiff after sleeping in such an awkward position, and it roused him too. It was just as well; there was no way they hadn't gone missing by that point. The same thought must have occurred to him as he suddenly sat up like a shot, taking her with him.

"What time is it?" he demanded earnestly.

"Haven't a clue," she replied calmly, reaching around to massage her neck.

"What are we going to say?" he asked even though he wasn't looking at her. He was busy taking note of the sun's position in the sky.

"I don't know," she shrugged nonchalantly. "The truth."

"C'mon April," he bit back irritably, making it very clear that he didn't think she was taking this seriously enough.

"You're right. What was I thinking," she countered sarcastically. "Ooh, we fell asleep, the scandal."

He glared at her for a moment and she made a concerted effort not to take any notice. He switched tactics by hastily gathering their leftovers and cramming them in the picnic basket. She, however, did the opposite and stretched her rigid body across the grass with a yawn. She could sense him prickling nearby.

"Raph, it's got to be nearing noon. If there was any chance that rushing would help us out, I'd be joining you," she explained sensibly. "As it is, there isn't any point. We aren't going to be noticed any less by booking it now."

He grunted in something that sounded to her like acceptance, albeit annoyed acceptance, as he plopped down roughly beside her.

"It'll be fine," she promised, basking in the warmth of the sun, which contrasted pleasantly with the cool grass beneath her, listening to the babbling sound of the stream that had inevitably lulled them to sleep. She was glad of the unseasonably warm weather that year, urging spring on more rapidly than usual. It all brought back memories of her childhood.

"Have you seen any frogs?" she asked, craning her neck around to absently search, still too lethargic to put any real effort into it.

He cocked his head to the side quizzically. "Was I supposed to be looking for 'em?"

She shrugged. "It's nothing. I just used to catch them a lot around-" Her voice dropped off and her eyes widened as she suddenly recalled something from her youth. She sprung into a sitting position and instantly began yanking off her shoes.

"What the hell are you doing?" he barked, absolutely bewildered as her socks quickly followed her shoes.

"I used to catch turtles out here too!" she explained excitedly while stuffing her socks into her sneakers then making a mad, barefooted dash for the stream.

"You've got to be shitting me," she heard him groan from over her shoulder, but she was already ankle deep in the water, looking intently around.

"Let me get this straight," Raph began, rising to his feet and making his way to her side. "Getting back isn't important but finding-"

"A turtle is, yes," April finished for him, trying to infuse an inflection of it being a most serious business even as the beginnings of a grin crept up her face.

"And you plan to do this by splashing around where it lives," he continued undaunted, looking down at her feet.

"I-" She followed his gaze to her feet and they both looked up, eyes locking.. Unable to keep her smile at bay any longer she admitted, "I may have gotten a little over excited."

"Uh-huh," he grunted.

"I never found any at this spot though," she recalled forlornly. Her brow crinkled, trying to remember the specifics from so many years ago. "Oh! This way!"

She abruptly headed down the stream a few steps, and then paused briefly. Thinking better of it, she turned in the opposite direction. "I mean this way," she corrected herself, as she set off purposefully once more.

Raph scrambled to catch up after collecting her shoes and the picnic basket. "Are we really doing this?" he asked irritably as she took her shoes from him, one in either hand.

"You wanted an explanation when we got back," she replied. "Now we can tell anyone who asks that we went on a turtle hunt. Mikey will understand that."

"Mikey will complain that we didn't invite him," he grumbled back, now in step beside her on the edge of the stream.

"That too," she agreed cheerfully, unwilling to let his sour mood bring her down.

"So where are we headed?" he asked, his voice sounding as though he was beginning to give in.

"The stream opens up into a pond further this way," April pointed ahead of her with one shoe through the path the stream cut through the trees, their limbs arching overhead.

"Unless it's that way," he replied cheekily, pointing in the other direction.

"It's been awhile, so sue me." She continued to march doggedly forward. "But I'm very… mostly sure we're going in the right direction."

"How far?" he continued to press, still fixated and glancing back in the direction of the farmhouse.

"I'm also very, mostly sure it's not far," she answered assuredly, despite the fact that she couldn't have been less precise if she tried.

"Riiiight," he responded with uncertainty but she caught the corners of his mouth quirking up. "So you gonna go barefoot in the stream the whole way?"

"You've clearly never walked in wet shoes. Not pleasant. Besides, the water feels good. Wanna see?" She pivoted toward him, a sly look crossing her face.

"Don't!" But it was too late; she had already kicked up purposefully, splashing him in the process. It hadn't been much but that didn't matter; the challenge had been issued. "Oh, you're in for it now!" he vowed, as he hunched down, clearly intending to jump in as hard as he could next to her.

"RAPHAEL WAIT!" she shouted both her hands held up in protest, doubtlessly looking rather silly shielding herself with the treads of her shoes. Still, it was enough to make him pause. "If I get all wet, we'll have to explain that too," she offered logically.

"Seems to me getting wet wouldn't be too far-fetched in a turtle hunt," he retorted, smiling broadly, his green eyes gleaming with mischief. "Mikey will understand."

"NO!" she squealed as he came down beside her with all of his weight, soaking her from the waist down.

After a short-lived splashing match that she was clearly not going to win and gave up on, the stream started to widen, opening into a large pond. April felt nearly as accomplished as she had when she first found the spot so many years ago. In reality, her mother had more or less guided her there…but she had made her feel as though it had been her discovery.

"If you come really early and are super quiet, sometimes you can see deer come here for a drink," she happily recalled out loud. "I used to sneak out here and get back home before my parents woke up. Think my grandfather knew what I was up to though."

Raphael regarded her fondly. "Used to do my fair share of sneaking off too."

She thought about prying him for more, to share a specific story from his youth that would have set him off on a solo adventure. But she knew that would inevitably harken him back to Leo or Splinter. She saw the genuine smile he wore then, the playful look in his eyes and knew he was a million miles from that grief at the moment. No reason to send him back there. Despite his earlier protestation, he was excited to explore someplace new, curious as to what they might find, and it occurred to her that a simple pond may be mundane to a lot of people, but he'd never seen one before. Probably assumed he never would.

"You still do," she scoffed playfully instead, placing her shoes at the base of a tree, and he did the same with the basket. She took his hand and they started walking the circumference of the pond, admiring the lily pads beginning to emerge from the green depths and feeling the cool grass and soft moss under her bare feet.

"Not as easy to do around here," he admitted. "Nothing but trees. I know my way around the city, but…"

"It's all about landmarks," she replied. "Things are slow to change out here. You already know my path, the stream, and now the pond. You can always come out here if you need to."

She was slowly realizing that it wasn't just the pond, but that everything out here was wholly foreign to him and she couldn't help but appreciate the wide world around her with new eyes. She was beginning to feel a twinge of guilt about not bringing the others after all when Raph pointed out to a dead tree that fallen across the water. On its trunk, two small turtles rested, basking in the sun.

She was about to declare victory when he nudged her forward gently. "Well, go catch one," he urged.

"It's not that easy," she admitted sheepishly. It hadn't occurred to her on this venture that he might wind up disappointed.

"I thought you said you used to do this all the time?" he pressed.

"I caught *frogs* all the time," she corrected him. "Frogs are easy. I've only managed a turtle twice and that's because they were far enough away from the pond. She pointed in the direction of the sunbathing turtles. "They'll just plop in the water before we even get close enough to make an attempt."

He seemed to be considering the distance and his surroundings. "Wait here," he decided, stepping into the water.

"Raph," she called out as he headed deeper in. "This really isn't necessary."

"It's no big deal," he called back before taking a breath and submerging completely.

She sat herself down, crossing her legs and waiting patiently. It was so quiet then, only the creek in the distance and the quiet hum of insects making any noise. He'd gone deep enough that the surface of the water gave off no evidence of his passing. Absently she wondered how

long he could hold his breath or how well he could see down there. The water was not being exactly what anyone would call pristine.

Suddenly he exploded out of the water and she scurried excitedly to her feet. "Did you get one?!"

"Quick! Get the basket!" was the only answer she was given, so she quickly obeyed and raced to where he was emerging from the water.

By the time she reached him he was already reclined against a tree, a much smaller shell resting on top of his plastron.

"You did it!" April gasped, dropping to her knees beside him.

He put a finger over his mouth. "Shh. He's scared." It was true; its head and all its appendages were safely tucked inside its shell. "Get me a grape," he instructed in a hushed tone.

April dug her hand into the basket and felt around. She handed him the grape and he bit it in two, placing half of it on his plastron.

They waited expectantly when its head began to cautiously emerge. April made a tiny squeak of excitement and instantly it tucked its head back in. Raphael shot her a condescending look; she mouthed 'sorry' back, and the waiting game resumed once more.

Finally it made a second attempt and this time April held her breath as it surveyed its surroundings. When it felt comfortable, the rest of its limbs followed and it took a chomp out of grape.

"You like that, little guy?" Raph commented softly, pointing to the basket.

April fished out another grape and he did the same with it. She was surprised at how quickly it was wolfing them down. It seemed quite at ease now, especially with the steady stream of grapes being provided. "Awww!" she cooed. "We should name him Sheldon."

Raphael scrunched his face in disgust. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"Oh, you got something better I suppose," she challenged.

He cocked his head to side, regarding the turtle before declaring, "Rocky."

"Rocky?" One corner of her mouth twitched up as she looked at him affectionately.

"Hell yeah," he affirmed. "Look at him. He's totally a contender."

She watched as he made some light jabs in the air toward Rocky while humming the theme to Rocky. The turtle seemed to take little notice as though it had decided that if something bad was going to happen to it, it would have already.

"You want to take him home?" she asked.

His jabs slowed until he stopped completely and she instantly regretted asking, knowing she had just reminded him of Spike. She found herself wondering how he'd faired through the invasion. Raphael had to be wondering the same thing, but he didn't betray anything. Instead he seemed only to consider her question and she could tell part of him wanted to say yes. And then he sighed, "and take him away from all this? Nah."

He picked up Rocky with one hand and it immediately receded back into its shell. In his other hand, he grabbed a handful of grapes and set it on the bank along with the turtle. It remerged much quicker this time, familiar with the ground, enticed by the scent of the fruit nearby. "Don't let nobody give you any shit," he advised sagely.

They returned home to little fanfare and could hear Don and Casey tinkering away in the barn, none the wiser. Raph seemed almost irritated by that, perhaps because she continued to be right that he was blowing things out of proportion. Or perhaps because he was guiltily considering how they still had no idea what was going on.

April nodded toward the barn door as they strode past. "Knowing Don, he probably hasn't even been awake long," she commented soothingly in an attempt to temper whatever thoughts clouded his mind.

He grunted noncommittedly in response as they rounded the house to the kitchen door, putting away leftovers and stashing the picnic basket before venturing into the living room to an ever present Michelangelo. And for as oblivious as the others may have been, Mikey more than made up for it.

"Where have you guys been?" he blurted upon seeing them, dropping his game controller.

"None of your business," Raph bit back, clearly not liking such a direct line of questioning. Particularly from the one person who had the least reason to be concerned about their comings and goings.

April threw him a chiding look.

"What?" Raph demanded of her, crossing his arms petulantly across his plastron. "It's not!"

April chose to ignore him and sat herself on the floor beside Mikey instead, who was giving Raph his best attempt at a stare down. "We just went on walk and it turned into a turtle hunt," she said softly.

"You found me!" Mikey cheered instantly, forgetting his brother and throwing his hands up in the air. She chuckled in response, but could see the wheels started turning in his head. "… Wait, what?" he asked.

"There's a pond near here that I used to find all kinds of animals at," April explained. "We decided to check it out."

Mikey looked sincerely hurt at being left out. "Seriously though, you guys didn't ask me to come?" he whined, complete with those big, puppy eyes he so expertly wore pulling at her

heart.

"It wasn't like we planned it, Mikey. And we didn't want to wake you," she offered consolingly. But she was feeling thoroughly guilty. They'd all been so listless lately and it was much harder than it was for anyone else for Mikey to bear.

"You could have gotten me up! What time did you go? You've been gone *forever*!" Mikey exclaimed in a voice of the truly lonely and bored.

Behind the couch she sensed Raph dropping his hands to his sides with a resigned sigh. "What time did you wake up?" he asked.

"About ten," Mikey answered in a forced whimper.

"Then I guess we left about ten," Raph wise-cracked.

Despite herself, April had to quickly stifle a laugh and it came out as more of a snort from behind her hand. Mikey gave her a sideways look at the noise. "And why are you all wet?" he pressed, looking her up and down.

"April fell in. She's clumsy like that," Raph smirked, causing April to chuckle again, which she tried to hide with a turn of her head.

"Mikey, just…just…," April pleaded, rising to her feet and rejoining Raphael. "We're going to check on Leo and I promise I'll come hang out with you after that, okay? We'll do whatever you want."

"Oh, is that what we're doing?" Raph countered, clearly enjoying this act of being difficult. "I don't know. Should we ask Mikey's permission first?"

"Just get up the stairs," she whispered at him hoarsely, uselessly trying to push him in that direction, which he seemed to find equally amusing. All the while, she could see Mikey eyeing them curiously from her peripheral vision. Thankfully, Raph began to cooperate on his own.

"We're going upstairs, Mikey," Raph called back as they ascended the steps. "I hope that's okay with you. You know, this might be easier if we compared schedules sometime or-"

April smacked him on the back of the head as they reached the top, but it didn't wipe the smug expression from his face. If anything, it only grew in satisfaction at the rise he was successfully getting out of her.

She pushed him into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. As soon as the latch clicked into place Raph faced her with a look of amused condescension. "I feel *so* bad," she openly admitted, hugging herself around the waist.

His expression quickly changed to one of disbelief. "*YOU* feel bad?" he demanded incredulously. "*Mikey* is not the problem here." He chopped one large hand across the air at her in finality.

She nodded quickly, despite not being able to shake the feeling as quickly as logic would allow. He must have seen how affected she was.

"Just…go hang out with him or whatever, if you feel that bad." He plopped into a beanbag near the tub. "You'll see, he's fine."

She nodded again and couldn't help but wonder how much worse he must feel dealing with all this as she reached for the doorknob. Suddenly she dropped her hand, her brow crinkling as she remembered something from moments ago. "I'm clumsy like that?" she demanded spinning to face him once more, her hands accentuating the point with air quotes.

A smirk crept up his face. "Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing? Making up shit?" he countered. "Look at me! I'm the 'making up shit' master!" He mimicked her with air quotes of his own.

She scrunched her face at him defiantly but couldn't come up with a witty retort quick enough. Petulantly she stomped a foot at him instead before flying out the door once more. She'd gladly spend the day consoling Mikey, she decided; he was decidedly less of a smart ass.

Chapter 10

Raphael never imagined that he'd one day consider Donnie's habitual night-owl ways a nuisance. Why would he, when it had never affected him before? But now his sleep schedule had been thrown to shit, waiting for Don to turn in on a nightly basis. Not to mention the occasional frustration of waiting up only to find his brother had decided to pull an all-nighter.

That morning he was at the point that when the five am alarm on his phone started blaring, he wanted to chuck it out the window, training or no training. He would have, if he only had himself to worry about.

As it was, he rolled off the futon with a groan and forced himself outside. A quick survey from the porch revealed that April wasn't there. She rarely missed training, but he knew – intimately – that she was keeping the same hours he was. But if he made himself get up for her sake the least she could do was fucking be there.

Raphael sighed irritably, went back inside, and ascended the stairs of the silent house purposefully. Despite his frustration, he rapped quietly against April's door, not wanting to start anyone else stirring. As out as he figured she was though, there was little chance that was going to do the trick.

He stood in the doorway indeterminately for a moment, before making the decision to go in, opening the door just enough to stick his head through.

"April," he called in hushed tone.

Still nothing. He could make out the outline of her sleeping form under the covers from the soft, early morning light trying to penetrate the closed blinds, unmoved by his attempts. After a moment's consideration, he stepped inside, shutting the door behind him. It felt strangely like an invasion of privacy. He'd never considered actually being in a girl's bedroom before now, for any reason. Still, she'd practically had free run of their home, so he decided he was probably thinking too much of it.

"April," he called out again, approaching her bed. He was still whispering, despite the fact that he was close enough now that it was no longer necessary. Perhaps because she looked so peaceful.

She groaned slightly this time and then rolled over, turning away from him, and it was enough to inspire him to be more assertive.

"C'mon April. We're getting a late start as it is," he said, louder this time.

She whined into the pillow and threw back her covers in annoyance and he couldn't help but notice the linen shorts and tank top she wore, riding up and slightly exposing her mid-drift.

He admired her briefly before realizing she couldn't get dressed with him there. But just as he was about to leave, she instead scooted her body farther away from the edge of the bed.

She wasn't getting up at all; she was inviting him in, he realized in awe.

"April…" he faded off, uncertainly.

"Raph, we were up until after two last night," she whined, her voice partially muffled by the pillow. "And the night before that. And the night before that we didn't sleep at all. Just stayed up clear until dawn."

Just hearing her talk about it was making him drowsy. Not that he needed much convincing; - he'd have to be an idiot to pass up the opportunity being offered to him. He looked at the door once more to make sure he had shut it completely.

"Does the door lock?" he asked.

"No," she yawned. "Stop worrying. No one comes in here."

He approached the bed once more, the mattress giving way under his weight as he tentatively crawled in beside her, pulling the covers back over them both. She immediately took his arm and wrapped it around her, melding her body against his. He'd never considered the physical act of sleeping with someone else before. She was warm and soft next to him. The very act felt intimate and indicative of her trust, enough so that it'd be stirring different desires in him if he weren't so tired.

Instead their breathing slowed and their bodies grew heavy. Still, he managed to mumble, "We can't make this a habit," into her hair.

"Mm-hmm," she hummed quietly and he doubted what he said had even registered to her, before he drifted off as well.

She had woken up several times over the past few hours, just barely enough to register he was there with her. No matter what position she had woken up in, she felt his arm still tight around her, as though he was hanging on for dear life. It made her feel needed and safe all at the same time and she'd find herself nodding back off almost instantly. Some distant part of her was aware that they were pushing it and the hour was growing later and later, but in her lethargic state she couldn't be bothered to heed the warnings of her own mind.

When she finally began to stir for what she knew to be the final time, she found her body facing his, her chest pressed against him, the fingertips of one hand curled around the rim of his plastron. She smiled against his neck and tried to give herself some wiggle room, but that only made his grip tighten around her all the more.

"Time to wake up, big guy," she murmured.

"Five more minutes," he pleaded softly.

"It's getting late," she insisted. "The others are going to start wondering where we are."

He mumbled something in response she couldn't quite decipher.

"We can't keep going like this," she persisted, undaunted. His eyes shot open at that and she felt his body instantly tense, knowing his mind was conjuring up a million different ways to interpret what she had just said. "These hours, I mean," she clarified. "It's just not feasible." Just as quickly, she felt him relax.

"I hear ya," he yawned. "But I don't know what we can do about it."

"Good morning, by the way," she smiled. "Not a bad way to wake up."

"I could get used to it," he admitted, brushing a lock of her hair behind her ear. "I've never seen you with your hair down before."

She reached up bashfully pulling her hair up with one hand

"No, I like it," he assured her and she blushed, releasing her hair to fall around her face once more.

His rough hand slid down against her jawline, leading her lips to his. There was more intensity this time, less uncertainty, as though a change of scene had inspired new confidence. Their breath came loud and ragged against one another. She instinctively hooked one leg over his as she reached around to grasp the rim of his carapace with one hand. She felt his hand grasp her thigh, hiking it up more, and she hummed encouragingly into his mouth.

There was a sudden knock at the door and they froze, still tightly melded against one another. "You there, Red? It's, like, eleven," came Casey's voice from the other side.

"Shit," Raph cursed, under his breath.

April stroked his bicep soothingly with an untroubled look on her face, assuring him that she had this. "Yeah, I was just waking up actually," she called back to Casey. "Just slept in today is all."

"See? I told you she wasn't off somewhere with Raph," they heard his voice quieter now, clearly talking to someone else.

"Shit!" Raph cursed again, hoarser this time, as they both scrambled out of bed.

She went to the door, opening it up a crack and peered out to see both Casey and Mikey standing there. "What's that?" she asked nervously, noting that her voice inadvertently sounded higher-pitched than normal.

"Nothing," Casey shrugged. "It's just we can't find Raph either and Mikey here said something about the two of you 'probably going off somewhere again', whatever that means," he scoffed and nodded in Mikey's direction, who scowled in return.

"No one listens to me ever," Mikey complained as he turned away from them both, heading back to the stairs.

"Why would I know where Raph is?" she replied defensively. "I've been in here all morning."

"…Yeah, that's pretty much what I just said, Red," Casey chuckled. "He's probably just blowing off steam somewhere. We tried calling him, but he left his phone in his room."

"I'm sure he'll turn up soon," April agreed. "Let me get dressed. I'll be down soon."

"Sure thing. Catch ya in a minute," Casey replied as he descended the stairs.

She shut the door once more and exhaled before turning around to a wide-eyed Raphael. She took another deep breath before addressing him. "See, Raph, it's all fine."

"Fine?" he blurted out in disbelief. "Did we not just experience the same damn thing?"

"Yes, we did, and it has all blown over," she replied, certainly.

"Mikey," he spat, mostly to himself. "Can never mind his own business."

"I thought you said Mikey wasn't the problem," April retorted obstinately.

"Don't get cute, April," he shot back with a glare. "We both know we're talking about completely different things."

She rolled her eyes. "Look, all you have to do is go out the window, come around the house and act like you went out for a walk or something."

He glowered, looking more pained than angry and sat wearily on the edge of the bed. "Look April, all this sneaking around stuff… it's just not me. I don't like it."

"Oh, and I suppose that means I do!" she demanded angrily.

"I didn't say that!" he barked, low and guttural. "And keep your voice down!"

"'Keep my voice down' he says," she threw back bitterly. "I thought you didn't want to sneak around anymore. Why don't we just both go downstairs together? That sounds like -" She stopped herself abruptly seeing the look on his face. On the surface he was ready to fight, but the fire wasn't in his eyes. Instead she saw the toll all of this was taking on him. She sighed sadly, sitting down beside him and placing her head on his shoulder. "I don't like it either," she confessed weakly.

"I know," he acknowledged. His voice somber but there was something comforting in it as well.

She stared blankly ahead at a fixed point on the wall. "So what do you want to do?"

"You're asking me?" She felt his body vibrate against her as he chuckled forlornly. "I thought you were the one with all the answers."

She didn't reply, just glanced at him desperately.

He sighed deeply, rubbing the back of his head with his free hand. "I guess…I'm going to go out the fucking window."

She smiled in a way that she knew was too pleased. "Thank you," she breathed. "We will tell the others when it's the right time."

"Okay," Raph agreed with a nod of the head.

"Donnie first," April added and hoped it showed that this was predominately on her mind as well, that he wasn't alone.

He paused thoughtfully for a moment. "Yeah," he croaked solemnly.

April squeezed his hand consolingly before he left her side. He pulled up the blinds, opened the window, and then he was gone. She sat alone, unmoved for a time, ruminating over the events of her life that had brought her to this point. She hadn't realized how long she had been lost in thought, staring vacantly at the floor, until she heard the slam of a screen door and muffled voices from the floor below. She forced herself to her feet and crossed the room to her dresser, opening the top drawer and rummaging through it for something suitable to wear.

She studied her reflection in the mirror briefly and forced a causal smile, ensuring she was making a convincing show of it. Not that it took much effort; she'd been forced to become practically an expert at it almost as soon as they stepped onto the farm. And after all, if Raph could suck it up and face the world, she couldn't ask any less of herself.

Chapter 11

Raphael hovered over Leo in the late afternoon, deep in thought. Mikey could hang for all he cared after the trouble he had caused that morning, but he hated lying to Casey. …Not that he hadn't had it coming, what with Case not giving him the time of day lately. And not that it had even been a big deal. He'd said he'd gone out, went to the kitchen to grab a bite to eat, and then immediately headed up to Leo. No one had questioned any of it.

Why would they? he reflected soberly. *They trust me.*

"Anytime you want to wake up is fine by me," he commented irritably to his unconscious brother.

"I second that," came April's voice from the doorframe. It surprised him, seeing her suddenly sweep in full of sunshine, bright smile in place so that he found it hard to keep his dark mood.

"So everyone was wondering where you got off to this morning," she teased with a sly smile, rocking back and forth sheepishly on the balls of her feet. "What's all that about?"

He smirked back, deciding to play along, wondering if she was purposefully trying to defuse his discomfort. "Oh, you know. Making out with my girl. No biggie," he shrugged nonchalantly.

"A girl!" she exclaimed, wide-eyed. "Well, I simply must know everything. Is she nice?"

"Sure. She's a peach," he replied simply. He paused for a moment before adding seriously, "Wouldn't want to cross her though."

"Sounds right up your alley," she nodded approvingly. "Pretty?"

"Scale of one to ten? Fucking twelve," he answered smugly, confident that whatever this game was, he had just won it.

"Stop!" she turned away from him, hugging herself about the waist. But her smile betrayed her. "I am not," she added, blushing deeply.

There was an awkward pause between them and he sensed she had shown up for a reason other than playful banter.

"So you want to play a game?" she asked, swiftly shifting gears before he could think up a reply. "I know we haven't in a while. I was trying to play it cool or…I don't know what I was trying to do, but fat lot it's seemed to have done us after today."

"You can say that again," he muttered. "Sure, why not?" he agreed, still feeling as though she was there for something more.

"'Kay," she chirped happily. "Be right back."

While she was away, he arranged the two bean bags, leaving a spot between them for whatever board game she showed up with. When she returned, he could not suppress his disappointment. "Scrabble," he groaned.

"Yeah, we're kinda getting to the bottom of the barrel here," she admitted glumly. "It was this or Trivial Pursuit."

"So long as Donnie isn't allowed to play," he commented snidely and she laughed, more than he would have expected.

"Watching Jeopardy with him is *the* worst!" she agreed enthusiastically, plopping down into her bean bag and setting up the board.

"I coulda told you that," he said. "He only does it to show off."

"Right," April nodded, offering him a knowing grin and handing him the bag of tiles. "And that's something *you* would never do."

"Don't know what you're talking about," he threw back casually, but purposefully flexing and exaggerating every muscle as he took the bag from her.

April immediately roared with laughter, her body falling back into the bean bag so that her hair brushed the floor.

"What?" he asked in mock confusion, keeping a straight face as he stretched his arms in an exaggeratedly nonchalant manner, his biceps bulging. April laughed all the more, her body shaking as she strove to catch her breath, genuine tears falling down her cheeks.

"What's so funny?" Casey demanded eagerly from the doorframe. "You're shaking the entire house."

Raphael deflated instantly upon seeing him, lowering his arms and adopting a look of annoyance instead. It was bad enough that Casey was never around anymore without him ruining his time with April on top of it.

"Raph is," April hiccupped, straining to get out the words. "Raph's hilarious."

Casey looked at Raphael in bewilderment. "Raph?"

April's breathing came ragged as she tried to get ahold of herself, so she simply nodded a confirmation.

"This Raph?" Casey pointed at him as though she were clearly confused. "This Raph right here?"

"Fuck off," Raphael blurted at the apparent impossibility that anyone would enjoy his company and it sent April over the edge once more.

"See? Hilarious!" she managed to get out.

"…Whatever," Casey muttered bitterly, tucking his hands in his pockets. "I actually came up here for a reason, if anyone cares."

"Oh yeah?" Raph asked suspiciously, focusing on the lettered tiles he'd drawn as April's laughter faded into giggles.

Casey focused on Raphael with uncharacteristically serious intent. "Can I talk to you?" He shot a quick glance at April and it hadn't gone unnoticed if her sudden silence was any indication. "Y'know, later."

The gravity in his voice put Raph ill at ease and he paused longer than he intended before answering. "Uh, sure."

"Cool," Casey answered with a somewhat relieved smile. "Catch ya later then."

They sat in tense silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts. Raphael stared vacantly ahead at the game board. April, still reclined, gazed absently at the ceiling. Eventually she cleared her throat and asked, "So…what do you think that was about?"

"I have no idea!" Raphael blurted out sharply, but she didn't jump or respond in any way. He was relieved that she knew him well enough to know that it wasn't directed at her. Still, he reigned himself in, lowering his voice. "…Do you think he knows?"

"Casey?" April replied doubtfully. "And be that chill? No. It's something else."

He regarded her thoughtfully, recalling how perceptive she could be. "Yeah," he agreed. "You're probably right." Logic, however, did little to put him at ease.

April propped herself up on her elbows. "You want to go find him now and figure out what's going on?"

He shook his head. "Nah, it'd be weird now. Let's play a round first."

"Good." She sat up straighter and picked up a few tiles to place down her first word. "Because," she began apprehensively, "And I know this is terrible timing, but I wanted to talk to you about something myself."

"I knew it!" he declared, pointing at her. "I knew it as soon as you walked into the room."

"Just hear me out," she entreated. "…It's your turn by the way."

"I know!" he barked. "Expect me to be able to think straight with all this shit going on," he mumbled to himself bitterly. "Got no vowels."

"Anyway," she snarked. "We've been kind of skating around this issue, but I really think it'd be a good idea if we started training later in the day. Like around eight…maybe later…" she trailed off hopefully.

He shot her a disapproving look, which she had clearly expected as she held her ground, stubbornly meeting his eye with her own stony glare. "We're both exhausted," she argued. "The important thing is that it's done, not when it's done."

"Except that everyone will know we're doing it," he shot back.

"Oh no! They'll know we're training together. What a nightmare," she replied, dripping with sarcasm.

The only response he saw fit to give her was to glare at her even harder.

"Y'know what, fine," she said, waving one hand dismissively. "It was just an idea. We can just stop these late nights of ours instead."

"What? Because you're losing sleep?!" he demanded.

"I'm trying to tell you that I can't physically keep this up and, quite frankly," she added pointedly. "Neither can you."

"Newflash for you April," he replied irritably, "The enemy isn't going to care about how much beauty sleep you got the night before."

"I don't plan to spend my evenings staying up all hours of the night making out with the Foot Clan!" she threw back. "That's Leo's deal," she added lightly, nodding at his brother, and he knew it was for levity's sake.

He hated that he couldn't control smile that cracked his face. "I'll think about it," he conceded.

"That's all I ask," she replied sweetly.

"You're turning me into a damn push-over, you know that?" he commented, shaking his head as he finally placed some tiles on the board.

"Hear that Leo?" she spoke up. "I've done the impossible. I think that means *I* should be running this outfit."

He marveled at her as she considered her next move and wondered if she hadn't realized that, for all intent and purposes, she practically already was.

Raphael was somewhat relieved to find Casey in the living room. He had no idea what Jones wanted, but the idea of approaching him in the barn alone with Donnie right there was more than he wanted to deal with.

The fact that Casey instantly perked up when he stepped into the room and immediately nodded to the kitchen put him little at ease. It occurred to him that he probably wasn't in the barn because he'd been hanging around waiting for him for…whatever reason.

"Dude, I need your help with a thing," Casey began as soon as the door to the kitchen closed behind them. "It's no biggie, but I think we need to keep it between us. April wouldn't approve. We don't need that noise."

Raph tensed up and desperately wished that something, anything in his life right now could be easy. He was already keeping something from the family and now Casey wanted him to keep something from April.

"Look man," Casey continued imploringly and Raph knew he wasn't doing a good job of hiding his tension, like he ever had. "It's for the good of the family. Promise." He made a motion with his hand, crossing his heart while throwing him a cheesy grin.

"What the hell could be for the good of the family and upset April at the same time?" Raph asked suspiciously.

"It's like this," Casey explained. "Remember when I said I was working on the Jefferson's place?"

"Yeah," he answered, having absolutely no clue what that had to do with him.

"He hired me to work on this big ass fence of his, but dude's got, like, a lot of land. Things friggin' huge! It's taking forever but he wants it done yesterday. Found out he's trying to sell the place and has someone coming to look at it, so wants it looking its best I guess. Anyway, he offered to pay triple if I get it done by the end of the week. But no way in hell that's happening at this rate, not by myself. You follow?"

It wasn't hard to see where Casey was going with this and he felt his spirit rise with the thought of actually being able to do something useful. Sitting over Leo day in and day out feeling utterly useless would have driven him mad by now if it weren't for April. But much as he wanted to, how could he? The thought of him walking around freely on someone's farm as any other farmhand was laughable.

"Jones, you've had some stupid ideas before, but this has got to be the lamest yet," he snarked.

"See? That right there is why I don't want to tell April. She wouldn't want to risk it. But that ain't us," he added, a little too chummy for Raph's taste seeing his absence of late. "I ain't dumb, Raph. Figured we go together at night. It'll be cool. Place is in the middle of nowhere and most of the fence isn't along the road anyway. You and me together will get it done in no time and pull in some real money."

Part of him wanted to ask why he didn't just go to his precious Donnie about this idea of his, but that would have meant he wouldn't be able to contribute and he desperately wanted to, so he pushed the thought away.

It also occurred to him that April would be way cooler with this than Casey believed. "You do realize April's going to know something's up when we're not around," Raph said, testing to see if he'd actually considered all the angles of this scheme of his.

Casey shrugged. "We'll just act like we're going to hang like we've done a million times before. She'll eventually go to sleep and not even realize we've been gone all hours of the night."

Raphael knew that wasn't true at all, not with the hours April and he had been keeping. Not that Casey could possibly know that. It wasn't until that he realized this alone time with Casey would probably be very awkward.

"You in?" he asked hopefully, perhaps noting that Raph seemed apprehensive in agreeing.

"Yeah," Raph answered after a moment of thought. "I'm in."

"Great! We start tonight," Casey cheered, heading out the door once more.

Raph was instantly grateful that he had slept in that morning. April wasn't kidding about losing out on sleep and it didn't look like it was going to get any better. He sighed, knowing he was going to have to give in to her wishes, and went to tell her about this new turn of events whether Casey liked it or not.

Chapter 12

Between the weird hours he'd been keeping and this temporary night shift with Casey, Raphael was dead on his feet. It was only the first of many all-nighters he'd have to pull this week and even though his body had been more fatigued in the past, he couldn't remember the last time he was just this straight-up sleepy.

As they pulled up to the house, the damn rooster welcomed them along with the new day.

"SHADDUP!" Raph hollered back at it as he stepped wearily out of the van. The rooster turned toward him and, if anything, only crowed louder.

"Do you see this?" he asked Casey in disbelief. "He's calling me out!"

Casey chuckled, tiredly dragging his feet up the porch steps. "You're lucky we're beat, bird. You don't wanna mess!"

Raph smiled slightly as he followed him into the house. For a moment he was reminded of old times, and his heart ached for them.

He went straight up to his room, collapsed on the bed and immediately fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. When his eyes opened once more, he knew it was well into the afternoon. He made it his first point of order to check on Leo, as he always did, before searching out April, who he found in the kitchen.

"Good afternoon, sleepyhead," she sang out cheerfully, head deep in the pantry.

"Okay," he breathed, standing behind her.

"Okay, what?" she queried, throwing him a confused look over her shoulder.

"Okay, you win," he sighed. "About training."

"Oh that," she giggled, returning her attention to the pantry. "Yeah, I kinda already figured that out, considering how late it is. I'm ready whenever you are, by the way. I was just looking for what we're going to have for dinner tonight. Going to make it early so you and Casey have a chance to eat before you run off to work."

He wondered if an early dinner would raise any suspicions, not that it ultimately mattered much. "Remember to keep that on the downlow. Casey still thinks you're not in the know."

"Which is the stupidest thing, if you ask me," she countered as she collected two boxes of Tuna Helper. "Why does he think I'd care?"

"He thinks you'll worry," he answered with an exaggerated shrug, suggesting he agreed with her. "At least that's what he said."

"Of course I worry. I worry about you guys all the time. But you're big boys. You can take care of yourselves." She placed the boxes on the table and turned her search to the refrigerator.

"Knowing Casey, it's more likely a case of 'better to ask forgiveness than get permission'."

"That sounds about right," he agreed.

She emerged from the fridge with a couple of water bottles and tossed one to him, which he caught effortlessly. "Let's get at it," she enthused, stretching her arms over her head as she walked out the door.

He wasn't sure why he hadn't divulged more. That Casey had understood the risk they were taking. That he had talked to him that night about how, if anything happened, they had nowhere else to go. Maybe because he liked to think this lucid side of Casey was one only he got to see. Maybe because he stupidly didn't want to say anything that may make her see Casey in a different light. Maybe he was just happy to get his friend back and didn't want to jinx it… even if it had been a forced situation.

"Coming?" April called, shaking him from his train of thought. He followed her outside, stretching an arm across his plastron to kick off his warm up.

Raph hadn't been quiet about the fact he was worried changing their schedule would attract attention. He couldn't be sure what effect it might have, but at least he had mentally prepared himself for it when Mikey had stepped out onto the porch. The littlest turtle watched them curiously for a moment before deciding to contribute his input.

"Guys, relax," he finally drawled, putting on his mellowest voice. "The only good thing about Ole Fearless being out of it right now is that we can chill."

Raph tensed to hear him make light of Leo's condition. Not to mention how his little brother was completely missing the point anyway. He knew exactly what Mikey was doing. He had a long history of trying to get his brothers to go along with one thing or another for safety in numbers. He was about to tear into him when April softly spoke up.

"I'd just hate for poor Leo to wake up and see everyone out of shape," she commented coolly, as though she were just partaking in light conversation. As though she didn't know exactly what she was doing. "He'd be so upset."

Raph couldn't help but notice she continued calmly cycling through her katas as she spoke, even keeping her breathing in check. It really was coming more natural to her. Meanwhile he had stopped, distracted by his brother - who was looking rather wounded by her remark.

"…I'm not out of shape," Mikey replied after a contemplative moment. "It's only been a few weeks. It's cool."

"A few weeks?" Raph snapped, as he got back in sync with April. "Do you even know what day it is?"

"A month?" he tried hopefully.

"It's been nearly two, Mikey," April answered sweetly.

"Two months?! That can't be right…" And to his credit, he did seem genuinely awestruck at the realization. "Guess it wouldn't hurt to get back on the wagon," he decided cheerfully, leaving the porch and joining them. "DONNIE!" he yelled loudly toward the barn, his voice cracking. "WE'RE NINJAING!"

"Jesus," April winced, breaking form for the first time. She quickly resumed, and Raphael noted how smoothly she picked up where she'd left off.

Donnie emerged from the barn and crossed the yard. "Guess we *have* been slacking off for a while," he admitted, getting into place beside Raphael.

Raph grunted back non-committedly. He didn't want to get into *who* exactly had and had not been 'slacking off' for a lot of reasons. Not the least of which was that he was somewhat surprised that Donnie had actually joined them.

"Next time you do this, get me," Donnie added sincerely.

Strange as things had been between all of them lately, he couldn't resist a surge of anticipation of possibly having someone to actually spar with again. And, as his brothers got into sync with him, a piece of his life that was missing began to find its way back into place. He couldn't deny how right it felt and a grin snaked its way up his mouth

"You got it," he answered Donnie with equal sincerity.

It was no wonder Casey needed help, Raph quickly realized. This 'repair' job was more a 'completely needs to be redone' job. The old wood hadn't been properly treated in years and was practically rotted through in many places.

Raphael had a hard time feeling so exposed at the work site. Even if it was in the middle of nowhere, even if they never saw anyone pass by in the distant road, working someplace unfamiliar in wide, open pastures didn't feel natural. To make matters worse they often had to work with the van's headlights temporarily on just to see what they were doing. Ironically, he started to feel like he'd be less conspicuous during the day as opposed to working beneath a literal spotlight.

Casey, on the other hand, was oblivious as usual.

"Check it," he crowed. He pulled his hockey mask down over his face, eerily illuminated by the van's headlights. With a handsaw in one fist he started a slow, menacing stalk. "I'm low-tech Jason Vorhees."

"You helping me with this or was the plan to get me out here so you could goof off?" Raphael quipped. He wasn't even sure why Casey had brought the mask; the only reason he could

come with was that old habits died hard. The thought struck him with another pang of nostalgia for their late night jaunts through the city.

"Don't even start, Raph," Casey retorted, lifting the mask up once more. "Do you know how much of this damn thing I put up on my own? This job is making me loopy."

Raph held another plank against one post as Casey propped the other end. "You shoulda got me out here earlier then," he said, sounding more wounded than he intended to as they both set about hammering their ends into place.

"Dude, I didn't-," Casey paused. He briefly lowered his hammer, desperately searching for the right words before he resumed. "I thought you wanted space."

For all his faults, Casey was still the easiest person for him to talk to - so long as they weren't in the heat of the moment. So similar were they in so many ways, they didn't have to delve into deep conversation, dissecting the minutia of their troubles. Instead they tended to skip over the unnecessary and get straight to the meat of the problem. They didn't have to make an already uncomfortable conversation more so by turning it into a formal event. Even now they didn't look at each other, continuing on with their work as they spoke as succinctly as possible.

"I did," Raph eventually admitted. "But…" he shrugged indeterminately.

"I miss hanging out too," Casey conceded. "We should after this job's done." He looked at him for the first time during the conversation, eyes full of mischief. "I heard of this place nearby during one of my jobs. There's a lake and a place to rent boats. We should totally do it."

Raphael chuckled at the ridiculous notion. "You know how to drive a boat?"

"How hard could it be?" Casey shot back. "You need to be 21 to rent one," he said mostly to himself as though he'd had this idea in the back of head for a while. "We could get around that," he added assuredly.

"Uh-huh," Raph grunted. "And what's the plan for getting me onto this boat after you somehow get your hands on it."

"We can figure all that out. It'll be a blast. Just like the Mustang, remember?" Casey cajoled him.

That was one hell of a night, Raphael recalled. They had taken out some random Purple Dragons, just like any other night they went out looking for trouble. Hearing an engine idling nearby, they'd followed the sound to find a pristine '69 Mustang, the doors wide open for a quick getaway that was no longer going to happen, the engine purring invitingly. It had proved way too much temptation. Wordlessly, with only a glance between them, they had both raced for the driver's seat. They'd spent the remainder of the night joyriding in the muscle car, taking turns behind the wheel and pushing it to its limits before sadly dropping it off in a vacant lot as the sun started its slow creep on the horizon.

"So now we're stealing a boat," he smirked.

"C'mon man, we didn't steal that car. We borrowed it. From assholes," Casey retorted.

"So we're gonna *borrow* a boat," Raph clarified. "…From assholes."

"Yeah!" Casey laughed. "Boat-owning assholes!"

"You're an idiot," Raph good-naturedly ribbed.

He allowed Casey to carry on about this adventure that was never going to happen and it felt good to get back on normal terms with his best pal. He was relieved it hadn't been as awkward as he feared - then again April hadn't come up. His mind drifted to her, Casey's voice fading into the background, and he wondered what she was doing right then.

A monotonous drip from the sink faucet kept time to Raphael's thoughts as he sat beside Leo, a duty he felt he'd been neglecting lately. Still, he expected Leo would be happy that his brothers seemed interested, or at least willing, to begin a training regime again. April had insisted they invite them after the previous day's events - which he should have anticipated.

April quietly entered the room, and he made space for her on the beanbag. She plopped down next to him, resting her head on his shoulder as he took her hand in his, thankful for her nearness even though he knew it'd be brief. He had become accustomed to spending every night with her and, even though it had only been a couple of days, it somehow felt longer since they'd had any time alone. It was strange how you could see someone every day and still miss them.

"I've got to get dinner ready soon," she sighed glumly, entwining her fingers with his.

"I'm glad this job is only a couple more days," he breathed into her hair.

"I've missed you too," she murmured, looking up at him. "But we all really appreciate what you're doing. Even if not everyone knows you're doing it. My two big breadwinners."

A broad smile swept across his face in an instant, to be recognized, to be appreciated, even with such simple words, even if he had to share it with Casey.

She beamed back at him and he knew she understood, though part of him wished she didn't. "Raph, I'm very grateful for what you're doing, but from the very beginning you've been an important member of this team…of this family. You know that, right?"

He took in a sharp breath, trying hold back a wave of emotion that threatened to overtake him. "You're the one holding us all together April," he insisted, solemnly. Honestly, what was he accomplishing out here? Donnie could always make himself useful. Casey had been keeping a steady stream of money coming in for at least a month now. Mikey was good for morale if nothing else. He was good in a scrap; he knew that. But there wasn't any call for it out here in the middle of nowhere. All he could do was wait over Leo. All he could do was mourn. He was less than useless. A burden if anything.

He was drowning in thoughts that were familiar but hadn't crossed his mind in a while. She'd provided distraction from them, preoccupying his time and his musings, and their return stung all the harder for their absence. Come to think of it, what the hell did she see in him anyway?

This was a losing battle and he knew it. From the look of concern that suddenly creased her face, she did too. He tried to nod, do something to confirm what she had said so that he could turn away from her, retreat back into himself. Before he could, her hands rushed up to cup his face, gently holding him there.

"Listen to me Raphael," she said earnestly, her watery eyes matching his. "Watching after Leo is important. He needs to know how much we cared about him when he wakes up. Training me is important. You know how much it means to me. And -," she stopped abruptly, her face a wary mask.

"Get out," he breathed, low and severe, his brow tight and fists clenched. "Get out of my head."

"I-I wasn't…" she stammered, dropping her hands and scrambling to her feet to give him space. But he could see by the look on her face, the way her eyes quickly shifted away, that he was right on the money.

He rose to his feet, staring daggers at her. "You don't get to do that," he said darkly, jabbing a finger at his head.

She couldn't look him in the eye and that all but validated every assumption he had made. She opened her mouth to speak, but clearly couldn't come up with anything. After a moment she nodded meekly and, hugging herself about the waist, left him there glowering after her.

Strangely, her out-of-character reaction made him feel all the more justified even as he was angry she didn't just have it out with him. He would have known how to deal with that. Now this issue - her violating his mind - was going to be hovering over them until they figured it out.

That night Raphael was preoccupied with what had fallen between him and April earlier that day and, more so, her reaction to it. She had skated around him the rest of the evening, avoiding eye contact and he swore she'd even flinched as he'd passed her in the kitchen whilst getting his dinner. And it did nothing to temper him at all; if anything it did the opposite. Was he supposed to feel bad for calling her out on something she knew damn well she had no business doing?

The work on the fence had become repetitive and it didn't help that Casey had been uncharacteristically quiet, leaving him to ruminate undistracted. Casey was just about as good as hiding his feelings as he was and something was clearly bugging him.

"What's eating you, Jones?" he had finally asked after it became clear that this cloud wasn't one he could shake. He wasn't getting anywhere replaying the events of the day over and over again in his head .

Casey paused. After a moment he muttered: "Nothin'. Don't worry about it."

"If you say so," Raph shrugged, hammering another board into place.

They continued working silently for a couple more boards before Casey blurted out, "Alright, you really wanna know?"

"Knew I could drag it out of you," Raph sarcastically remarked.

"Your brother's an asshole!" he barked.

"…Which one?" Raph asked snidely.

"You know which one!" he barked back. "Do you know what he's doing right now? Same thing he's been doing every night this week. Making the moves on April."

"What," Raphael breathed dangerously, hammer clenched in his fist. It was an impulse, and he glanced warily at his friend. Perhaps Casey hadn't noticed in his own state of righteous indignation. Perhaps Casey thought he was siding with him. In either case, he showed no indication.

"You heard me! He's been bragging about it all week, how they've been spending the evenings together, watching movies and…and shit," he spat as Raph tried to take in his words calmly. It was a struggle.

April hadn't said how she'd been spending her evenings…though he hadn't asked come to think of it. But he saw no reason to doubt Casey. It wasn't that he really thought anything was going on, and he held onto that thought as best he could. But he knew Donnie's intentions. And worse still, *she* knew Donnie's intentions. His grip on the handle tightened even more so that he could feel the wood start to give.

"It's cuz I'm fucking stuck out here! Y'know, providing for the family!" Casey vented, kicking over a bucket of paint, the van's headlights illuminating the white seeping into the surrounding grass. Raph understood the need to take his frustration out like that. Hell, he could feel the urge coming over him as well.

"I don't know why I even care," Casey muttered bitterly to himself, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I mean, what kind of chance does he think he's got anyway?"

And there it was.

"What was that?!" Raphael's eyes flashed at Casey and he froze as though just remembering he was there.

"C-c'mon man," he tried to deflect, taking a few steps back. "I didn't mean-"

"Then what exactly *did* you mean, Jones?" he demanded sharply.

"I just-Dude, don't be like that," he flustered. "It's just, y'know…how the world works."

"How the world works," Raph repeated slowly, rolling the words around his mouth and he could see how uncomfortable it made Casey. "Well, glad we got that cleared up. Real eye-opener."

"You don't have to be an ass about it!" Casey rebuked angrily and Raph knew why. Knew that he felt bad for saying it. Knew that apologies didn't come easy by him. And knew he meant every fucking word. "I don't make the rules!"

"Thank fucking god for that!" Raph shouted back, throwing down the hammer and closing the space between him and Casey. "Let me get this straight, you say something like that to me and *you're* fucking angry that it pissed me off?"

"Raph, I've heard basically the same fucking thing come out of your mouth before." He had the audacity to roll his eyes and reached down to pick up the hammer as though he'd settled the whole matter with those words.

He watched briefly in disbelief as Casey got back to work, clearly hoping everything would just be dropped and they could move on. But if Casey honestly thought he was going to let him slide like that, then Casey didn't know him half as well as he thought he did. His hands tightened into fist as he stalked to Casey's side.

"Look man, don't make this into a-" he'd begun before being cut off by Raph's fist in his face. He got the satisfaction of seeing blood gush from both nostrils before Casey's hand flew reflexively to his face. "FUCK!" he cursed behind his hand, his eyes narrowing at Raph and he knew that they were going to have a good row and honestly he welcomed it.

It was a quiet ride home that night. Oppressively quiet. Raph drove as one of Casey's eyes was swollen nearly shut. Meanwhile, a painful lump was quickly forming on the side of Raphael's head. They arrived to an equally quiet house and silently went their separate ways.

Despite the hour, Raph found himself staring at the ceiling, unable to sleep. Things had felt like they were starting to get back in order, training with his brothers and hanging with Casey again. Now, the thought of looking at that jackass sent a scowl across his face.

And he had no idea how to resolve things with April.

Chapter 13

When he woke up the next day he found April lounging on the couch working in that journal he knew she'd been keeping. He hadn't thought about it much, but suddenly found himself wondering how much of him was in there. Given recent events, he was fairly certain that it couldn't be anything good.

She looked up to see who had entered the room and he could tell from her expression that she had intended to continue avoiding him.

Even still, she couldn't help but gasp at the sight of the knot growing out the side of his head. Before he could tell her not to make a fuss, her mouth closed, her lips thinning into a serious line. "And just what happened to you?" she queried him.

"…Nothin'," he answered cryptically.

"Really," she replied, full of skepticism. "I spoke with Casey earlier. It must have been the same 'nothing' that gave him a black eye."

"Must be," he snapped, brow furrowed and eyes narrowed.

"Honestly!" She snapped her journal closed. "You're supposed to be friends. What on earth would make you two beat each other senseless?"

He leaned in close and gave her a curt, gruff, "Nothin'."

"Cute," she bit back tersely.

Part of him really wanted to suggest that if she really wanted to know what had happened, maybe she should go digging around his head for it. He might have, except Casey entered the house at that moment. She rolled her eyes, placed her pencil behind her ear, gave Casey a stern look, and stepped outside rather than get mixed up in their conflict.

The swelling had gone down around Casey's eye but it was a quite a few shades darker than it had been the night before. Raph sensed that Casey wanted some kind of reconciliation but, like himself, had no idea how to get there. So instead Casey simply said, "We gotta finish this thing tonight y'know, if we're gonna make the deadline."

"Yeah, I know," Raph grunted, not attempting to hide his resentment, arms crossed over his plastron.

Casey scratched the back of his head thoughtfully. "…Ya still gonna-," he pried cautiously.

"'Course I fuckin' am! We need the money." He headed to the kitchen, throwing over his shoulder: "Even if that means working with your dumb ass."

The drive to the job site that night had been a quiet one. Raphael wore a scowl and was doing everything in his power to come across as unapproachable, something he excelled at. He watched dark forests and the occasional dirt road or mailbox slip past, the houses belonging to them hidden by the thick trees that lined either side of the road. The people that chose to live out here valued their solitude. He could relate.

Still, Casey was too familiar with him for it to last forever. He'd eventually cleared his throat to make an attempt he'd certainly been working up to since they'd got in the van. "Look, about yesterday-"

"Forget about it," Raph cut him off. He didn't want to talk about it and there was nothing Casey could say to fix it anyway.

"So…We cool?" Casey asked hopefully, giving him that dopey, gap-toothed smile, the one he used whenever he was trying to get out of a jam.

Raphael sighed helplessly and after a moment replied, "Yeah, we're cool." He didn't feel okay about it. He didn't feel okay about a lot right now. But he didn't see anything to gain from holding something against Casey that he couldn't take back. Besides it wasn't the most predominate thing on his mind.

"I was thinking," Raph began, knowing a change of subject was in order. "We're nearly done with this job. Shouldn't take us more than a few hours if we push it."

"You wanna do somethin' after?" Casey asked cautiously.

"You said Donnie and April have been hanging out these past few nights, right?"

"Yeah," Casey sniffed disdainfully.

"It'd be a shame if they were interrupted," he suggested, a smirk replacing the scowl he'd worn moments before.

"YES!" Casey whooped in excitement.

Casey hadn't questioned his motivations. Maybe he hoped his friend was siding with him, though after yesterday that'd be a stretch. Maybe he thought Raph'd just find it funny to mess with his brother. Or, knowing Casey, he probably hadn't given it much thought at all. Whatever the reason, they finished the job even faster than he thought they would, and Casey was almost giddy on the ride home. Part of him felt a pang of a guilt, but between what had transpired between them yesterday and his preoccupation with what was going on with April, it did little to deter him.

Despite the fact they had finished early that night, it was still late by the time that got back. Just after one in the morning according to the soft green glow of the digital clock in the van's dashboard. But the living room light still shone from the window as they pulled into the drive.

This is going to be great," Casey said gleefully to himself. Raph thought he was overestimating the reaction they were going for, but his excitement was infectious all the same.

"What's up!" Casey announced himself brashly as he stepped through the door, Raphael right behind him.

A movie was playing in the background. April and Donnie sat next to each other on the couch, a bowl of popcorn between them. April locked eyes with Raphael as he plopped in the armchair, leaving the next move to Casey.

Casey made a beeline for the popcorn, picking up the bowl and squeezing in the too small space between the two of them as though he had only done it for the snack. He turned toward a bewildered Donnie, their faces inches from each other. "What're we watching," he asked innocently, mouth full of popcorn.

"Mikey wasn't invited?" Raph spoke up in a casual tone, unable to contain himself.

"He went to bed," April answered matter-of-factly, not breaking eye contact with him.

"Imagine that," he remarked snidely. "It *is* kinda late."

"You're right," she agreed with mocking sincerity. "Think I'll turn in myself." Then she addressed Donnie with a genuine smile. "Thanks Donnie. We'll talk more tomorrow, okay?"

"Of course." He rose to his feet and watched her ascend the stairs. "I've got work to do anyway," he added, throwing Raph a bitter glance as he walked out the door.

Raph felt as though Don were directing his words more toward him than to Casey, and for a moment he was thrown. But he supposed from the outside it could have looked as though he were siding with Casey against his brother. The fact that the truth was much worse was a sobering thought and he wondered why he'd even come up with something so childish as barging in on them in the first place.

Watching Casey chuckling triumphantly to himself as though he'd won something, all the while shoveling popcorn into his face, only made him feel all the more foolish. After all, April was more than capable of taking care of herself - and he trusted her. If it hadn't been for the fact that they'd had issues this week -

That's when he remembered what had really been the cause of all this, and that it was far from resolved.

"Left my phone in the car," Casey realized after a moment of bewilderedly patting himself down, and went to retrieve it.

Raph took the opportunity and went upstairs to knock determinedly on April's door, just restraining himself from pounding on it.

April answered the door in an oversized t-shirt, her hair already pulled loose from its ponytail and hanging in a bob around her face. The expression on her face suggested she'd expected

him to show up. "What was all that about?" she demanded haughtily, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

"Could ask you the same thing," he threw back. "Because what it looks like to me is that we had a fight and you went running off to Donnie. Real classy."

"That's not what-," she tried to explain, and he could tell referring to what had transpired between them had thrown her. Just mentioning it made her start to withdraw again, her eyes tearing up, but he was on a roll at that point.

"Bet he knew all the right things to say. Bet he told you exactly-" He stopped mid-sentence uneasily. Apparently that'd been enough to snap her out of whatever state she'd been entering, her eyes ablaze. More than that, there was an unnatural crackle in the air and he instinctively knew she was the source.

"SHUT UP!" she screamed. The door slammed shut in his face without a hand being placed on it and inside he heard the shatter of glass.

He stood numbly there for a moment, only half understanding what had just happened, thankful that Don and Casey were out of the house and that Mikey could sleep through anything. Cautiously he knocked, but she didn't answer. He stood, indecisively staring at her door, before opening it and peeking inside.

"April?" he whispered. She didn't respond, but she didn't tell him to go screw himself either and he could hear her crying. Finally he stepped inside and closed the door behind him. The room was dark but he could still make out the haphazard diagonal crack that now split her vanity mirror. He found her in a corner of the bed, hugging her legs to her chest and rocking back and forth with her face buried in her knees.

"So, uh," he began lamely. "That was new."

She didn't reply, only continued her muffled sobbing. He swallowed hard to see her so undone, unsure of what he was supposed to do, unsure even if she even wanted him there. But he was beginning to think there was more going on here than he had realized.

Words weren't his strong suit and there didn't seem to be any fitting in this situation anyway so he crossed the room and sat next to her on the bed. When she seemed okay with that, he put his arm around her and she responded by immediately unfolding her legs and wrapping her arms around him, crying into his neck.

They sat that way for a while, her body trembling against his. He let her cry it out in silence, confused though he was, and stroked her hair. Gradually she started to calm down. Eventually she choked out a meek, "sorry" as she sat up, wiping the tears from her ruddy face, looking slightly embarrassed.

"You're sorry that *I* was an asshole?" he asked.

"No. *You* can apologize later," she replied in no uncertain terms. "I'm sorry about…what happened the other day. I-I didn't mean to. I…I don't even know if –" He could tell she was

ready to break down again, but she took a moment and pulled herself together. "This isn't the first time something like this has happened and no one understands."

"I can try," he offered.

"…I don't even know if I can explain it," she admitted. "I've never tried before. There's no frame of reference."

He waited patiently as she considered how to approach the subject. She ran her fingers thoughtfully through her hair and nearly started speaking a couple of times before thinking better of it.

"It's like someone who needs glasses," she eventually began. She wasn't looking at him and for all the thought she had put into it, she didn't sound so sure. She picked aimlessly at a loose thread on her bedspread and seemed to be speaking to herself as much to him, having never heard these thoughts she'd been harboring out loud. "That person doesn't know they need them. They didn't wake up one day suddenly realizing they couldn't see anymore. Their eyesight went gradually."

So far the metaphor she was attempting was going right over his head. He'd never given a second thought to glasses and how they related to what they were dealing with he had no idea. He tried not to let on though, since she'd begun this explanation assuming she'd be unsuccessful.

"What I mean is, they assume everyone sees exactly like they do," she elaborated. "They have no idea until they put on that first pair of glasses how different the world looks to everyone else. Does that make sense?"

"Uh, sure," he shrugged, though still perplexed as to how this connected to her.

"Splinter was the first person that suggested I might be special – a gift he called it," she scoffed. "It wasn't until then that it had occurred to me that I could be any different than anyone else. I had assumed that everyone was just like me. Why would I think otherwise?"

"But then I started thinking back and there were times - times people looked at me differently, like they were unsettled in a way no one could quite put their finger on. People often said I had good intuition or was a good judge of character, but I can look back to certain instances where people were off-put by…me. The worst was when I lost a friend in the fifth grade. She was upset. I knew she was upset. Everything about me knew she was, even though she *looked* fine and everyone else seemed to think she *was* fine. I tried to reach out to her though, pushed too hard I guess and she got angry. The show she was putting on for everyone shattered. That was not my intent. She avoided me after that. Found out later her parents were splitting up."

"But I don't know where normal intuition ends and my 'gift' begins. I didn't know I was doing it to her then or if I did it at all to you yesterday. It's scary enough not having control over an ability that's clearly growing," she gestured to the now broken mirror, "Without even being aware of when I'm using it."

Satisfied with her explanation, she added, “It’s not an excuse, but -“

“Sounds like a pretty damn good excuse to me,” he interjected.

“All the same, I need to learn to control this, this…whatever it is. *That’s* why I turned to Donnie today,” she said pointedly. “I thought he might be able to help.”

“I, uh,” he stammered shamefully. “I didn’t mean any of that anyway. Casey just got me riled up the other day is all.”

“He’s good at that,” she conceded. “And besides, Donnie looked me up days ago anyway. You had to know he would, given the opportunity.”

Raphael had quite a lot to say on that subject, and nearly did seeing as how she’d brought it up. But considering how heavy the night had been for her already, it didn’t seem the time to stir up more for her to deal with.

Her attention seemed to be solemnly focused on the mirror she’d damaged, solidifying his decision to let things be for the time being. “I didn’t even know I could do that,” she murmured, wrapping her arms around herself. “What if it gets worse? What if something else happens?”

He placed a firm hand on her shoulder, redirecting her focus to him. “We’ll figure it out,” he promised.

She pivoted her body toward him, to give him her full attention. “Raph, I need you to know I would never purposely invade your privacy. But we’re getting closer and…I don’t know what will come with that. I’m going to try to be more conscious of what I’m doing. I need you to do something for me though, okay?”

“Anything,” he vowed.

“If you think…if you suspect that I might be prying, I beg you to be gentler about it. I try not to let on, but all of this really freaks me out,” she explained soberly. “I don’t even know what I am or why I was made this way. All I do know is that it wasn’t for any good reasons and that scares the hell out of me.”

He marvelled at how long she’d been internalizing these thoughts and fears. It was a practice he was intimately familiar with. It had admittedly left him rough-edged and guarded, and yet somehow she still managed to brighten any room she entered, earnestly, generously making herself approachable to anyone who was fortunate enough to meet her. It was easy to misread her as someone who carried less burdens.

“You can still be as hard as you want on me during training,” she attempted to joke with a weak smile.

No apology felt strong enough to convey his remorse for putting her in this position. He pulled her close and held her to him. It wasn’t enough. Nothing could be enough. But she shuddered against him and he knew that she understood.

“For the record, everything I said to you yesterday is still true,” she sniffed, and he could tell she was tearing up again. “I don’t know if you remember how messed up I was when we first got here or realize how much you helped me through that. But I haven’t forgotten. I don’t know if it’s true that I’m keeping us all together or not. But if I am - it’s because *you* are keeping me together.”

It was hard to envision himself being any sort of stability for anyone, particularly for someone who he felt had been fulfilling that role for him of late, perhaps better than anyone else ever had before. He knew full well the state he’d be in right now without her, fixated on his brother, withdrawing further into himself. It never even occurred to him that he could have been doing the same for her. And frankly it was hard to believe.

He was used to some sort of power play at work in all of his relationships. One he normally dominated with the exception of Leo. He’d assumed the same could have been said of April as out of his depth he felt since all this began. The fact that they might be on equal footing was hard to process.

Nestled against the crook of his neck, she couldn’t see the flummoxed expression that crossed his face following her admission. He wrapped his arm around her tighter to keep her there, as he stared wide-eyed into the darkness in front of him.

Chapter 14

She'd fallen asleep. She must have. Last thing April remembered was Raphael holding her and now she was alone in bed, comfortably tucked in, her head resting on the pillow. Light streamed in softly through the curtains, accompanied by a chorus of birds and she knew it was early.

She blinked drowsily and was about to roll over and go back to sleep when her eye caught a glimpse of her vanity mirror and she recalled what had happened the night before. She felt herself sit up before she'd even realized she was going to.

After slipping on a pair of shorts, she ambled about the house and was unsurprised to see no one else was up yet. Feeling restless and uneasy, she went about doing the simplest thing she could and started pouring herself a bowl of cereal when Donnie unexpectedly stepped into the kitchen, looking just as surprised to see her.

His face lit up and with a pang of guilt she knew she'd looked too happy to see him, not wanting to be stuck alone with her thoughts and uncertainty.

"I'll get the milk," he offered, so she started to pour cereal into another bowl.

Moments later they were sitting next to each other at the dining room table, quietly eating. He was one of the few people in her life who she could sit in comfortable silence with. It wasn't until she'd scooped up their bowls and he'd made them each a cup of coffee that she'd decided to speak as they reconvened together on the couch.

"So I take it you didn't sleep at all last night," she commented, taking the first sip from her mug. It was just how she liked it and she hadn't had to say anything, so well he knew her. Her shoulder slumped under the sobering realization. She was hoping for a diversion from unwanted worries from last night, not to replace them with the anxiety of Donnie's affection toward her.

He shrugged absently. "Got a little caught up in research I guess."

"Oh, what about?" she asked, blowing on the steaming contents of her mug.

"About you actually," he answered. "I'll admit I've never given much thought to extrasensory perception before. All of the so-called 'studies' are nothing more than pseudo-science."

She'd honestly been trying to give Donnie more space ever since her relationship with Raphael had begun. It seemed the natural thing to do and had been surprisingly easier than she'd expected. She knew that he'd been getting even more lost than usual in his various projects - understood that it was his way of coping.

Even so, she had still sought him out the day before, seeking whatever help he could provide after her confrontation with Raph. Not dishonest by nature, it took all her concentration to

appear as aloof and nonchalant as possible about her sudden interest. He was happy to oblige of course but she hadn't expected him to get to it immediately, much less stay up all night to satisfy her request.

"I confess, I'm actually pretty excited about it," he admitted. "This is completely new territory. I mean, it's not as though you can't find 'studies' on the subject." He rolled his eyes heavily, air quoting with his free hand. "But I suspect it all to be bunk. Still it's the best starting point we have so we'll see where it takes us."

Listening to the clinical way he talked about it put her strangely at ease. Frightening as it was for her, for him it was just another thing that could be tested and measured and understood. And that's exactly what she needed - something that could be explained.

"I think the first step would be to try and define what form of extrasensory perception you have," he continued. "The main categories are telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis. Of these, the only branch we've seen evidence of is telepathy. But I think we can get even more specific. You've never been able to pick out precise, concrete thoughts from another person before, correct?"

April had been listening intently, the warm mug cupped in both hands. "No, I don't think so," she answered thoughtfully. "I pick up strong feelings from people I guess."

"Exactly," he agreed, with a grimace. "I think at the moment you'd be considered more of an empath, not to say that it couldn't grow into something more," he added hopefully.

She eyed him dubiously. "And just what's wrong with being an empath?"

His eyes popped open, not realizing he'd given himself away. "Nothing! Nothing at all!" he assured her quickly. "It's just," he sighed deeply. "Emotions are very hard to quantify. How am I supposed to design an experiment to measure feelings?"

"That is a pickle," she agreed. They fell into a thoughtful silence together. Streaks of morning light played through the windows and she could make out the soft swirl of dust motes drifting within them. It was a tranquil moment so in contrast of the night before. She swallowed another mouthful of coffee and asked, "What's the one where you can move things with your mind?"

"Telekinesis," he answered matter-of-factly. "…Why?" he pressed, his interest piqued.

"I *might* be able to do that too," she answered cautiously. Half of her wondered if it was a good idea to bring it up. She knew he would pepper her with questions, and she'd have to remain vague. But it didn't make sense to approach him for help and then not give him the information he needed to provide it.

"Might?" he asked suspiciously. "Like how sure are you?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure," she replied confidently. "There was an…incident."

"Show me," he implored, wide-eyed with excitement.

“What?” she chuckled. “I can’t just – It doesn’t work like-,” she stammered, not even sure how it worked much less what she was trying to say. She finished off the last bit of her drink and placed the mug on the end table before rising to her feet. “Just – Come with me.”

He followed her to her room and inspected the mirror she’d pointed out to him.

“And you’re *sure* you did this?” he asked, still skeptical, leaning in closer to examine the crack.

She expected as much, reminding herself that his skepticism was part of the reason he was good at what he did. “Yes, I’m sure. I also slammed the door.”

He paused momentarily, standing up straight once more. “When you say that-“

“Without touching it,” she clarified.

“This,” he said, a broad smile cracking the analytical expression he was wearing a moment before. “Is really cool. And, more importantly, is something we can measure. I think-” He stopped short, his reflection in the mirror suddenly looking bewildered.

“What?” she demanded. “What is it?”

“Has *Raph* been in here?” he asked in confusion.

Immediately her heart started hammering in her chest. Grateful that he still had his back to her, her eyes darted around the room, wondering what could have given it away. Had Raph left something in there? What could he have possibly left?

Before she could respond, she heard him inhale deeply, and understood. It had never occurred to her before that they might have a more acute sense of smell.

He followed up his first question with an equally confused: “Why?” There was no suspicion in his voice. Why should there be? Just pure curiosity. For a moment she wished she hadn’t encouraged the idea her room was hands off, then there would be none of this nonsense to worry about.

“When this happened,” April explained, thinking quickly and indicating the mirror, “Raph heard it and came to check on me.” That was all true enough, she decided.

“Ah,” he remarked, accepting this explanation without question before pressing on. Turning to face her he asked, “I presume you were in a heightened emotional state when this happened, based on what we’ve seen of your capabilities so far?”

She wanted to say that she was in a heightened emotional state *now* . Her heart felt like it was still thumping a mile a minute and she hoped she was keeping a good poker face, even as he asked questions she didn’t want to answer. “That would be a fair assessment, yes,” she replied simply.

“Was it because *you* were distressed or because you sensed someone else was?” he continued.

“Both,” she answered cryptically, hoping that would be enough for him.

He nodded in satisfaction and glanced away, a bashful smile across his face. “I wasn’t that upset last night,” he said softly. “It wasn’t anything I’m not used to anyway.”

A sudden wave of nausea overtook her, and she wished a hole would open up and swallow her right then and there. As she struggled to keep her composure, an uncomfortable silence hung between them that she had no idea had to fill. Fortunately, he didn’t linger. “I want to try something,” he said and, taking her gently by the wrist, he led her out of the room and down the stairs.

April was actually relieved to hear the sounds of Mikey’s favorite cartoon channel as they returned to the living room. The familiar cycle of repeated commercials already imprinted in her brain was a welcome distraction and there was a certain comfort in seeing Mikey sitting there, entranced by the screen as he inhaled spoonfuls of colorful, sugared puffs from a bowl, humming along with a jingle.

“Morning Mikey,” she greeted him.

“Morning,” he repeated back, muffled by a final mouthful of cereal. He deposited the empty bowl haphazardly on the end table beside him.

“This will do as well as anything I suppose,” Donnie said, picking the spoon out of the bowl and handing it to her. “Apropos, wouldn’t you say?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she chuckled.

“It’s small,” he said hopefully. “And I don’t really expect anything to happen, but-“

“Why not,” she sighed good-naturedly, sitting cross-legged on the floor while he adopted the same position a few feet in front of her.

“What are we doing?” a now curious Mikey asked, his focus drifting between them and the television screen as he tried to decide which was more worthy of his attention.

“I’m going to bend this spoon,” April answered with a mocking tone.

“Or levitate it…if that’s easier,” Donnie suggested. “Just focus on it as best you can.”

“Are we using stuff from movies for science now?” Mikey teased, the TV ultimately losing out. “I’m all for it. That’d make me a certified genius. Can we build a hoverboard next?”

“No, we are certainly not,” Donnie commented disdainfully. “But the best we have to work with are the parapsychology studies of Dr. Jahn and, in case anyone was wondering, no they weren’t promising.”

“You are both making the ‘focusing’ part of this extremely difficult,” April cut in.

There was a brief moment of silence where they both watched her intently and, as silly as she felt a moment ago, now she was more concerned with disappointing them. She closed her

eyes, focusing on nothing but the spoon, the rest of the world melting away. But after a silent, agonizing minute, she was compelled to peek. Nothing had happened.

“Remember April,” Mikey added helpfully. “There is no spoon.”

“Yes there is, Mikey,” Donnie sighed, closing his eyes in exasperation. “It’s right there in her hand.”

“I’m going to try again,” April said quietly, wishing she’d paid more attention to what she had experienced last night. She held her breath and felt as though a vein might pop out of her head, so hard was she concentrating. She held her breath as long as she could stand, then exhaled deeply. But her second attempt was as unsuccessful as the first.

Nothing about this felt right. Last night was effortless. Intuitively she felt like the harder she tried, the least likely she’d be to succeed.

“Do or do not. There is no try,” Mikey wisely offered.

“We aren’t doing movies!” Donnie shouted.

“We’re a bunch of mutants who got chased out of our home because of an alien invasion, trying to help our psychic friend!” Mikey countered. “I think we’re doing movies!”

“Maybe if you tried pissing her off,” Raph’s voice cut across the room before Donnie could respond.

“Oh, we’re well on our way there,” April panted lightly.

“You may have something there,” Donnie considered passively.

Leaning on the back of the couch, Raph’s head cocked to the side as he glared at Donnie incredulously. “…I wasn’t *actually* suggesting you try and upset her.”

“Neither was I,” he replied coolly. “I was simply saying that based on what we’ve seen it, theoretically, might be effective.”

“I’m right here!” April blurted out, quite done with everyone feeling free to talk about her as though she wasn’t in the room.

Raph rounded the couch, reached over and took the spoon from April, and, much to Mikey’s amusement, bent it half manually. “Ta-da.”

April giggled despite herself and he smiled back at her.

“Trust you to find the perfect analogy for ‘matter over mind’,” Donnie quipped. Raph’s smile disappeared as quickly as it had come and she caught him throw Don a scornful look. “What we need is an electroencephalography device.” Raph’s face tightened further as he straightened up, crossing his arms over his plastron.

“I absolutely agree,” Mikey sagely nodded.

Both his brothers looked sideways at him in the same derisive manner. “Oh, do you?” Donnie asked.

“A thousand percent,” Mikey confirmed.

“I’ll bite,” Raph said, rolling his eyes heavily at his youngest brother. “What’s a…” He suddenly glanced at her briefly, looking somewhat self-conscious, then quickly refocusing on Donnie. “That thing you just said.”

“An EEG. It records brain activity,” Donnie answered. “I should be able to come up with something.”

“Duh Raph!” Mikey blurted out. Raph dropped his arms, brow knotted and fists clenched at his sides.

“Would you like some coffee?” April asked, distracting him gently. No one else had noticed what was happening - whether it was because his reactions were subtle, because his brother’s were too familiar with him to be phased by it...or because she was doing it again, she didn’t know.

“Nah,” Raph grunted, his hands relaxing once more. “Gonna check on Leo.”

“Should check his vitals,” Donnie muttered to himself as Raph headed to the stairs.

“No one offered me coffee,” Mikey whined, putting on a pitiful face

“No one would dare!” Don threw back at him immediately, not missing a beat.

“When’s training?” April asked casually as she collected Mikey’s bowl and the mugs she and Donnie had used. In her peripheral, she spied Raph pause about halfway up the stairs. She knew she was pushing, but really felt it was for the greater good. It was in all their best interests to stay on a regimen, and she knew from experience that this was something Raph would be good at.

“About thirty,” he answered somewhat uncertainly.

“Thirty minutes, you guys,” she repeated, her tone jovial but firm she walked off to the kitchen.

April stood outside the bathroom with a bagel and a glass of juice. While cleaning up after breakfast she had given herself a pep talk on not pushing Raph about anything. If he wanted to talk he would.

She walked in to find Raph on the stool perched over Leo. “Here,” she offered. “You should eat something before we get at it.”

“Thanks,” he grunted, taking the plate and glass from her and moving to the beanbag so she could join him.

“How you feeling after...y’know,” he drifted off uncertainly as she settled down next to him.

“After last night,” she finished for him. “Okay, I guess. Still weirded out. Now that you mention it, I have a tiny headache.”

He immediately put the plate down on the floor beside him and went to the medicine cabinet.

“It’s not that big a deal,” she assured him. “I hadn’t even noticed until you asked.”

“Probably all that crap Donnie had you doing this morning,” he muttered while rummaging through the contents of the cabinet, half of which had to be horribly outdated. She decided that going through it would be her next project.

“He’s only trying to help,” she replied sensibly. His only response was handing her two capsules and the glass of juice she’d brought him and she downed them both quickly in one gulp.

They sat quietly together as he methodically went about eating the bagel and she couldn’t help but reflect that the silence between them didn’t feel as comfortable as when she was with Donnie earlier that morning. She was reminding herself that there was still tension between them from the past few days and that something was clearly on his mind when they heard the sounds of an engine coming from the front of the house.

“Casey’s got himself another job already?” she asked Raph, happy for the excuse of small talk.

“Nah. Going to pick up the money we earned from the last one,” he answered.

“Just as well,” she said. “He can be a-”

“I’m not stupid,” he interrupted gruffly.

She smiled softly. Her patience was paying off. Not that he would have noticed, self-consciously keeping his focus on the last bit of bagel left in his hand. She suspected that this wasn’t an issue that normally plagued him, but given the situation they currently found themselves in, he was inevitably comparing himself to his brother.

“I don’t think you are. Donnie is a true genius. We *all* feel a little stupid around him sometimes. He has a wonderful gift. We all have our strengths,” she replied. “You do understand why I’m looking to him for help though, right?”

“I understand that he’s going to try to fry your brain,” he grunted bitterly, but it was halfhearted at best.

“Donnie knows what he’s doing,” April retorted.

“He blew up a mini-fridge once. How is that even possible?” he snarked, finishing the last of his breakfast.

“Raph,” she chided gently.

“Then there was the time Mikey convinced him to try and make rocket boots-“ he began, a smirk finally crossing his face at the memory.

“Raphael,” she warned a little harsher.

“Just don’t come crying to me if he wipes some memories or your ability to taste with his...electro...therapy machine?”

“Electro...en...graphy?” she giggled, uncertainly.

Raph snorted. “All I know is that anything with the word ‘electro’ in it isn’t going near *my* head.”

Their faints chuckles faded into thoughtful silence once more, and despite everything the atmosphere hung heavy with the need for closure.

“Are we okay?” April practically whispered.

He looked at her intently. “Of course! I mean, I am.” His glance darted anxiously toward the floor. “But I’ve been really stupid the past few days and -”

She leaned in abruptly to reassure him, their lips meeting for what felt like the first time in weeks, squelching all her fears. Her hair tie popped out as his hand dug into her hair and the thought of him being just as hungry for her made her melt into him as their mouths opened against one another in a familiar rhythm.

“Bro!” Mikey yelled from the bottom floor. “We doing this or what!”

They both groaned into one another.

“This is your fault y’know,” he said as she pulled away from him with a pout. “And since when does Mikey crack the whip?”

“He wants to get back inside in time for Crognard,” April complained and he responded by giving her a quizzical look. “I’m very familiar with Mikey’s television schedule,” she explained, as she retrieved her hair tie and started to pull her hair back up, peering into the mirror over the sink. “C’mon, let’s get this over with,” she droned once satisfied with her reflection.

It was nice to see the brothers acting like brothers, though somehow it made Leo’s absence all the more apparent, April reflected as Don and Raph sparred nearby. Raph had given her a walkthrough of a round knee strike and left her with Mikey to drill it.

It was so similar to the front knee strike (which she'd already mastered) that she hadn't minded and she suspected that he had an ulterior motive for wanting to spar with Don. But from what she could tell it seemed to be all in good fun - at least at the moment - so she was content to leave him to work through whatever insecurities he was dealing with in a comparatively healthy way, and focus on her own training.

But Michelangelo's clear lack of interest in what she was doing was a bit grating - if not unexpected.

"Mikey! What the hell are you doing with her over there?" Raph's voice suddenly cut across the yard. Taking advantage of his distraction, Don's staff swept his legs out from under him and he landed on his shell with a gust of air escaping his lungs.

"Time out!" he growled at him, shuffling back to his feet.

"The funny thing about 'time out'," Donnie commented flippantly. "You actually have to call it."

"This is boring!" Mikey whined. "Can I teach her backflips?!"

"Am I doing it wrong?" April asked, checking her stance.

"Yes, no thanks to this idiot," Raph nodded brusquely at his younger brother as he approached her.

"It was good enough," Mikey argued. "She's got it. ...Basically."

"I can do this with you April," Donnie offered goodnaturedly. "Raph you can do a round with Mikey if you want. I won the last one anyway," he added with a smug grin.

"I got this," Raph bit back through gritted teeth.

"Well, what am I supposed to do?" Mikey asked as Raph took a position in front of April.

"Just stand there. It's apparently all you're good for," Raph snapped before focusing back on April. "Alright," he directed. "Give me your best shot."

She fought the impulse to roll her eyes, knowing it was going to be as ineffective as it had been on Mikey, and followed through with his instructions instead, stepping out and pivoting her knee around into him.

"There, see the problem?" he asked, unphased.

"Yeah, I do," she replied, her eyes rolling up to the sky, unable to fight the urge any longer. "You're armor plated. Same problem as always."

"Oh, we're doing this again," he sniped, daring her to continue.

"Raph," Donnie urged from the sidelines. "Go easy on her. She's trying her best."

“You stay out of this!” Raph barked savagely back.

“What makes you think I want him to go easy on me?” April snapped in agreement.

“Oooookay,” Donnie backed off uncertainly. “Excuse me for trying to help.”

April caught him looking to Mikey for some kind of reaction, but the younger turtle simply shrugged back, matching Don’s confusion.

Raphael started walking her through it again correctly as the party wagon pulled back into the yard, Casey at the wheel.

“This feels weird,” April commented as she started going through the movements correctly, albeit slowly, pivoting her hips to give herself the range of motion needed.

“Of course it does,” Raph replied. “That moron let you do it wrong two dozen times.”

“It was good enough!” Mikey shouted to the sky.

“Hey, Mister Good Enough, why don’t you go drill it fifty times yourself,” Raph suggested, though it was clearly more of an order.

“You’re not the boss of me,” Mikey scoffed, plopping to the ground with a pout. “Besides that’s baby stuff.” He eyed his big brother warily as Raphael froze in place. One threatening lunge in his direction sent him scrambling to his feet chanting, “I’m going! I’m going!"

Raphael rolled his eyes, nodded briefly at an approaching Casey, then returned his focus to April. “You want the knee to connect. When you step out like you were, you end up giving ‘em too much thigh.”

“That’s what she said,” Casey sniggered.

April scowled, quickly pivoted on her feet toward him, reared back her hip and swung forward, kneeing him in the gut. Casey fell to the ground in a clump with little more than a wheeze. She briefly caught Don’s eyes shoot open with surprise as her hands flew to her mouth, aghast.

“YEAH! Now that’s more like it!” Raphael cheered, as both his brothers cracked up, the initial shock subsiding.

“Oh my gosh!” April gasped, falling to her knees beside Casey, curled into a fetal position on the grass. “Casey, are you okay?” He managed to groan for her benefit.

“He’ll be alright.” Raph nudged him in the back with his foot. “Get up ya big baby.”

“I-I didn’t think it’d work,” she stammered sincerely. “Or at least, I don’t know, not be that effective.”

“Of course it’d work. I keep telling you that most people we’re up against aren’t ‘armor plated’,” he countered pointedly. “And you,” he hollered at Mikey, who was still rolling with

laughter. “Get back to it.”

“Twenty-four,” Mikey began counting once more in a beleaguered drone, while April and Donnie hoisted Casey up and started to assist him inside.

“You were at seventeen!” Raph snapped decisively and Mikey groaned as though the weight of the world was upon him. “Maybe you should start over - just to be sure.”

“Everyone has their strengths,” April commented under her breath, one of Casey’s arms wrapped around her shoulders, his other around Donnie. Raph played it safe by not smiling in her direction - but he was smiling all the same.

Donnie had disappeared back to his workshop in the barn not long after depositing Jones on the couch. He’d had a rather disgruntled expression on his way out the door but she had been too busy making sure their newest patient was okay to try to interpret it at the time. But about an hour later, with a sandwich she’d put together as per Casey’s specific instructions in one hand, and a frosted soda in the other, it’d become painfully clear to her that he was milking this for all it was worth.

“Here,” she handed the plate and drink to him, with none of the soothing tones she’d been offering him earlier.

“Thanks Red,” he replied, but she could tell he’d noticed her change of demeanor. Not that common sense was something he’d ever allow to get him down. “Just one more thing,” he promised for what had to be the third time. “There’s an itch on my back that I just can’t-”

“You’re fine,” she cut him off. She was done and besides, she’d seen Raph head upstairs not ten minutes ago, looking fairly disgusted himself at the show Casey was putting on.

“Yeah, yeah, alright. Pressed my luck,” he admitted. “But can you blame me?” he asked, throwing her an impish grin.

“As a matter-of-fact, I can,” she answered plainly. “But I’ll get over it,” she added, making her way to the stairs.

“Hey Red,” he called to her once more, sounding more serious this time. “That was quite a hit. You nailed me good,” he confessed sincerely, sounding more than a little impressed.

Part of her was irritated at his apparent shock that she could hold her own even though she’d been training for some time now, but ultimately she decided to take it for the compliment it was intended to be. “Thanks Casey,” she said and he barely grunted back, busily wolfing down the sandwich she’d just given him. She wasn’t sure why it had to be so precise if he wasn’t going to take the time to even taste it.

By the time she’d reached the top of the stairs, the poor, injured Casey was already on his way out the door. She sighed. *Probably should have stuck with being irritated* , she decided

as she opened the bathroom door.

“So how’s the patient?” Raph asked as she entered the room. With a smirk he added, “Get tired of him yet?”

“You’ll be happy to hear that he’s made a miraculous recovery,” she answered facetiously.

His face clouded over despite her attempt at humor. “Least someone has,” he replied glumly, looking over his brother.

“None of that. We’ve both had enough negativity lately,” she insisted, taking him by the hand and leading him from the stool to the beanbag. He left her some room next to him as he sat down and it was all she could do to contain herself at his shocked expression when she straddled him instead. “Now, where were we?” she prodded, leaning in close.

“Leo’s right there!” he thundered, gesturing to him grandly with both hands - as though she’d forgotten all about him and needed it pointed out.

Playing along, with a tilt of the head she considered Leo thoughtfully. “...I don’t think he minds,” she finally decided. “Leo, if this bothers you, say something.” She waited patiently for a response, chuckling inwardly at the manner in which Raph gawked at her. “You know, you’re alright Leo. Don’t listen to people when they call you a wet blanket. You’re proving them wrong today.”

“I’m serious, April!” Raph insisted.

“You weren’t complaining about it this morning,” she pointed out.

“I’m not complaining,” he countered and she watched as he processed the fact that he was acting differently now than he had been earlier. “…’Sides, I wasn’t thinking about it this morning,” he eventually continued.

“Well, stop thinking about it now then,” she argued. “It’s been awhile since we’ve been able to be together and no one is in the house. You want to waste that opportunity?”

“...No,” he admitted.

April smiled softly at her victory. Her eyes closed as their lips brushed together. She tried to relax into him but he remained tense - and not especially responsive. She gave up with a growl and pulled away from him as Raphael stole a glance at his brother.

“What if he wakes up?” he said before she’d even had the chance to admonish him.

“If he wakes up, we’ll be so happy we won’t care about anything else,” she insisted logically.

“What if he can hear us?”

“Fine! Jesus!,” she gave in, throwing up her hands and rising to her feet. “Just meet me in my room, unless you’d rather come up with reasons why that’s a bad idea too.”

She wasn't mad with him. Not really. In fact, the whole thing was kinda cute, she'd decided as she took down her ponytail. She regarded her reflection in the mirror briefly before lying back comfortably on her bed. And it wasn't as though she was surprised that something like that would bother him. In fact, it was rather flattering that he'd forgotten himself so this morning.

She heard Raph's footsteps in the hall and smiled to herself. The sound stopped partway to her door and she assumed he was making sure that the house was still empty. Then the steps resumed until she heard a knock, and sat up.

"You don't have to knock. I invited you," she reminded him.

"Right," he chuckled to himself as though being invited into her bedroom was still the most mystifying thing he could imagine.

She patted the space next to her on the bed and he started for her earnestly, all his previous anxiety forgotten. But before he could reach her, he abruptly paused and a perplexed expression crossed his face. She looked equally confused and was about to ask him what was wrong when she suddenly knew. *No, please don't* , she pleaded silently.

He cocked his head to the side and with dread she heard him inhale deeply. "Has Donnie been in here?!" he demanded.
"Oh my god!" she groaned, throwing her body back onto the bed. "I swear, you boys are going to be the death of me!"

Chapter 15

“Okay, your turn,” April giggled. Her weight was relaxed and heavy against him, one leg hiked up over his to fit in the tight space of the couch where they reclined together. Outside, a light rain tapped against the house, making him feel lethargic and content.

They had finally gotten back to their familiar nightly routine. Fixing the fence had taken less than a week, but felt to him much longer. They had spent the first few nights just making out, as though to catch up for lost time, but the cuddling and chatting was just as good in a different way. It felt as though it’d been ages since they’d been able to just chill without any drama getting in the way.

They’d been idly complaining about the others. She had shared a story about Casey getting detention at school and, by her prompting, he realized it was his turn to come up with one. Half a dozen stories sprang to mind at once and he was trying to choose which was the best when she provided the scenario for him.

“What’s the real story behind how Casey burned off his eyebrows?” she implored. “I know the one he gave us was a lie."

He snorted to himself, recalling the event vividly.

“What’d he do?” she begged with a whine, kicking her feet playfully.

“Alright. So you’ve seen that juiced up bike of his,” he began, finding himself already chuckling at the recollection.

“That thing is ridiculous,” she scoffed.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Raph replied. “He’d been going on about what he was going to do with it, like hooking up a bunch of firecrackers was supposed to impress me. With the shit Donnie can throw together? Please.”

He’d never considered himself much of a storyteller, which was no surprise when comparing himself to his brothers: Leo’s careful consideration and thoughtfulness before speaking, Donnie’s precision and care for detail, and Mikey’s flair. Was it any wonder that he came off distant?

It was different around Casey though. They both communicated in much the same way, leaving no reason to feel self-conscious. Hell, if anyone could see the two of them alone, they’d probably think he was a regular chatterbox in comparison. Not that that would be saying a lot. Casey was the exception.

He used to be the exception at any rate.

“Anyway I told him he was going to blow his goddamn hand off and that if he really wanted something done right that Donnie’d probably help him out. His stubborn ass flat-out refused

that. So I asked him to call me over whenever he was going to pull this stunt so I'd at least have a fire extinguisher handy."

"That idiot," April laughed beside him. "What was it he told us again?"

"Purple Dragon with a flamethrower," he recounted, rolling his eyes. "He had a whole story that he made me promise to go along with."

"You're a good friend helping him save face…and also literally saving his face," she quipped.

"He was damn lucky all he lost was the eyebrows," Raph agreed.

"Oh my god!" She jumped in enthusiastically, apparently having just remembered something. "It reminds me of this one time with Donnie..."

Her voice quickly began fading into a drone in the background, his thoughts bubbling to the surface of everything unresolved between them. He hadn't even realized he'd felt any resentment toward his brother until that fiasco with Casey. Even now he knew it didn't make any sense, that it should be the other way around.

She'd finished her story and was waiting for a response, unaware he hadn't heard a word. Lamely, all he said was: "You've been spending more time with him lately", and he wondered how bitter it sounded. She hadn't really; he knew that. If anything it'd been the opposite.

"He's helping me. You know that," she said, shifting uncomfortably next to him. The levity was gone from her voice.

"I'm just saying…" he drifted off aimlessly, not sure where he should be taking this.

"Well, maybe you shouldn't be," she replied curtly.

"You know what he wants from you April," he dove in bluntly. "It's not like he's been real subtle about it."

"And you should know what I want by now," she said stiffly, her body tensing next to his. "Donnie and I are close. We have been for a long time. If you can't deal with that then... this isn't going to work."

"That's not what I'm -" he growled in frustration.

"I know. I know," she interrupted quickly, looking somewhat apologetic. "Look, I - This isn't going to be resolved tonight. Not until -" her voice faded soberly, her eyes looking distantly past him to some far off memory. "I thought about talking to him," she went on to admit quietly. "Almost did a couple of times."

"What!" he demanded, abruptly sitting up against the armrest of the couch, furious that she'd make a decision like that without discussing it with him first. April scrambled to her knees and pivoted to face him.

“Not about us!” she assured him quickly. “Just, y’know, making it clear where *I* stood with him. But at this point it felt like it’d be coming out of nowhere and would lead to more questions than we’d like right now.”

He threw one annoyed hand in the air as though to say ‘*so where does that leave us now?*’

“I should have done it during the invasion,” she murmured to herself, pensively staring off into space.

“Yeah, that sounds like the best fucking time to rip someone’s heart out,” he commented sarcastically, roughly running a hand up his face and over his scalp in frustration. The night had started out so great; how had they gotten here?

“He kinda gave me a perfect opening,” she explained candidly. “He tried to throw it all out there.”

“During the invasion!” he demanded in disbelief. “Why the fuck would he do that?”

She shrugged grandly, throwing both hands in the air. “We thought we were all going to die! I guess he decided ‘screw it’.”

He gawked at her for a moment. After coming up with nothing, he huffed. “I need a drink” he grumbled, and rose to his feet. “You want something?” he added as an afterthought.

She had scooted to the opposite arm of the couch. “A soda please.”

Searching the contents of the fridge, he already knew he wasn’t going to find what he really wanted. Not that Casey and he made it a habit, but a beer would go a long way right now. He doubted she’d approve anyway. Two sodas then.

Returning to the living room, he handed her a can and sat down beside her. Both their drinks gave off a crisp hiss in the silence of the room as they popped the tabs. April waited patiently while he took a chug, considering his next words.

“So... what’d he -” Raph cringed before he could even finish the question. “Nevermind. Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

“He didn’t say anything,” April replied simply. “I didn’t let him. I just... cut him off.”

“Why?” he asked. “I mean, it wouldn’t fix everything, but it sure as hell would have made things a little easier.”

“It was really bad timing and caught me off guard. Besides, I told you I wasn’t sure how I felt,” she reminded him.

He grimaced and took another slug of his drink before grumbling, “Can’t tell you how much I love hearing how you weren’t sure about hooking up with my brother.”

“Then stop asking!” she demanded. “I wasn’t even thinking about you that way then, Raph. Hell, you barely gave me the time of day!”

That comment took him by surprise and he looked at her sharply. "...That's not true."

"Right, Raph. You and I shared so many special moments back home. Name two," she challenged.

Silence hung between them as he realized the truth of her words. She waited patiently for his reply. She was good at that. When rushed he felt backed into a corner and would lash out with the first thought he'd have, which more often than not was defensive. She was giving him the opportunity to reflect past that rather than demanding an immediate answer or explanation.

"Look I - I honestly didn't think you'd have stuck with us this long," he muttered distantly, focusing once more on the drink in his hand. "Didn't seem much point."

"You don't need to explain yourself, Raph. I get it. I think I always did. You know... like I do," she indicated her head with one flighty movement of her hand. "It's not like I pushed things either. And I like that it's taken time for us. It's genuine. But you can't *blame* me that it's taken time."

"Fair enough," he conceded.

Despite the heavy conversation, her lips twitched into a sly smile. "Though I will point out that apparently Casey didn't warrant the same trial period I did. You two hit it off right away."

The thought had never occurred to him before, even though he couldn't deny it. "Casey -" he considered carefully. "It's different. He fit in."

"And I didn't?" April challenged him indignantly.

"NO! Okay, so Casey -" he fumbled. "You -"

"I swear to god Raph, if the next words out of your mouth are 'you're a girl' I'm marching right upstairs," she threatened playfully, but there was a spark in her eyes that warned him to tread carefully.

He tilted his head on the back of the couch, staring at the ceiling hopelessly, knowing how stupid the next thing he was about to say was going to sound. "...You're nice," he finally uttered and it sounded every bit as lame as he thought it would.

"Nice?" she tittered questioningly. "Yes, I can see how that'd threaten what you had going."

"You're joking, but kinda yeah," he replied, encouraged by her good-natured ribbing. "Me and my brothers - you've seen us. Half of how we talk is us ragging on each other, pushing each other's buttons."

"And Casey fit in," she understood.

"Yeah!" he enthused. "I mean, I already knew the rules with him right away."

She nodded. “You had no idea what to do with me,” she realized.

“Not a fucking clue,” he chuckled to himself. He glanced at her from the corner of his eyes and with a smirk quietly mumbled, “And you’re a girl”. He quickly took another drink.

“I knew it!” she shrieked, stamping her feet triumphantly.

“You two sure are loud,” Casey yawned from the stairs.

Both their heads shot up, unaware that he was there. “Sorry,” April apologized, rising to her feet. “I was just on my way to bed.”

“You don’t have to go,” Casey replied, shrugging one shoulder. “I was having a hard time sleeping anyway.”

“Oh no,” April teased, passing him on her way upstairs. “I’m not going to stay up another moment to hear anymore insults slung my way.”

“Dude! Not cool!” Casey harshly threw to a perplexed Raphael.

“You don’t even know, Casey. I’ve been called such things as ‘nice’ and ‘a girl’ and I refuse to sit here and take it any longer. Goodnight!” she finished with mock dramatic flair.

Casey looked properly confused as they heard her bedroom door click shut and Raphael’s shoulder’s shook in quiet laughter.

“I still think you two are weird,” he said, snatching up the remote and plopping into the armchair.

“You want a drink?” Raph asked, shaking the one in his hand.

“Sure,” he shrugged.

“Great. Fridge is right over there.” Raph nodded to the kitchen door.

“You know what I could really go for?” he asked, nonchalantly throwing him the finger, the light from the flickering television shifting colors in the room as he flipped through channels.

“A beer,” Raph answered for him.

“See Raph, you get me.”

April stopped brushing her hair, her reflection in the mirror suddenly creased with concern. Her head whipped around to the wall behind which she knew Raph was sitting vigil over Leo. Something had happened. Something very right... or very wrong...

“GUYS! GUYS! HURRY!”

She scrambled out of her room and down the hall, spurred by the urgency in Raph's voice. She must have been the only one in the house because there was no way anyone else wouldn't have heard him.

She found him knelt over the bathtub, calling out to his brother. As she hovered in the doorway, he threw her a desperate look.

"I'll get Donnie," she said, not waiting for an explanation. She bolted down the stairs and sprinted to the barn, her bare feet sinking into the grass, wet from last night's rain.

Donnie wasted no time. "It's Leo," was all she could offer before he hustled up his medkit and peppered her with questions she didn't have answers to as they raced back together.

"Is he okay?" Don asked as Raph moved out of the way for him.

He didn't answer as Donnie progressively went about checking Leo's vitals and reflexes.

"What happened?" Don tried again, prying one of his brother's unconscious eyes open and shining a light inside.

April stood back and wrung her hands nervously at Raph's expression, sensing his extreme distress. Looking at Leo she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. He'd looked exactly the same as he had these past few months. Even as the thought crossed her mind, it was hard to believe that much time had passed. The days crept past so slowly here here, but the thought of Leo being out of it that long was hard to accept.

"You're gonna have to give me something here, bro," Donnie pressed.

"His hand... he moved his hand..." Raph finally managed dazedly, mimicking the movement himself.

"What?" Donnie asked, pausing his examination to look at him.

April could see Raph returning to himself, months of frustration and helplessness overcoming him. "He moved!" he yelled. "He moved, and then nothing!"

"Okay - " Donnie tried soothingly, but it didn't get him very far.

"I know what I saw!" Raph thundered, all bristle and strained muscles, looking as though he wanted someone to contradict him, just so he'd have an excuse to throw down.

April wanted to intervene but couldn't help but feel it wasn't her place. Instead she stood back, anxiously pulling at her fingers as her eyes darted between them.

"Calm down," Donnie implored.

"I *know* what I saw!" Raph repeated even louder. "Stop fucking with us!" he added kneeling over Leo once more.

"RAPH!" Donnie tried desperately, his voice rising over his.

“WHAT?!” Raph matched him challengingly.

“I believe you!” The room hung silent for a moment aside from Raphael’s heavy breathing, his shoulders rising and falling , the tension in the room thinning. Once Raph seemed more receptive, Don continued: “His vitals have been improving lately. Stronger pulse. Responsive pupils - ”

“Why didn't you say anything?” Raph demanded accusingly.

“Because we've never faced anything like this before and I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up,” Don replied simply. “On that note I don't think we should say anything to Mikey,” he added, glancing to April, his eyes inviting her into the conversation.

“I think that'd be for the best,” she agreed. “But this - this is a really good sign!”

“Definitely! Good thing you were here,” Donnie encouraged his brother, grasping his shoulder.

Raph nodded in quiet uncertainty. She could sense him struggling to calm down without having anything to vent his frustrations on.

“I suspect it won’t be long now,” Don offered optimistically to them both.

April and Don had slunk downstairs, sensing Raph’s desire to be left alone. As exciting as this new revelation should have been, she found herself feeling strangely numb. The sudden adrenaline surge dissipated quickly to more of the same.

Together they wordlessly started making themselves lunch, and she sensed he felt very much the same. She found herself desperately wanting to tell Mikey, despite all wisdom saying otherwise. It’d be impossible for his excitement to not be infectious.

She wondered absently just where Mikey was anyway, surprised that he wasn’t parked in his familiar spot in front of the TV. It had at least freed it up for them, and they ate lunch whilst watching reruns, occasionally engaging in a little small talk. She couldn’t help but be preoccupied with how Raph was doing though, knowing he had to be sharing the same confused and frustrated feelings without the benefit of distraction.

She was grateful when Don decided to return to work, allowing her to check up on him. She crept into the bathroom apprehensively and found Raphael sitting on the tile floor in the lotus position, eyes closed, looking uncharacteristically peaceful.

“Oh sorry,” she apologized quickly, turning to leave.

“It’s cool,” he assured, opening one eye at her. “You don’t have to go.”

She turned around thoughtfully, one arm hugging her waist. “I just...I didn’t peg you as someone who was generally down for this sort of thing,” she shrugged with her free hand.

“I’m not. Usually. It’s -” he exhaled deeply, deflating and relaxing his posture. “This is stupid.”

“What is?” she asked, taking a seat in front of him.

“This crap means a lot to Leo. With what happened... I don’t know... I thought he’d appreciate the effort. That it might help. Stupid,” he muttered, his eyes darting away.

“It’s far from stupid,” she encouraged, placing a hand on his knee. “Lots of people pray.”

He screwed his face up at her, looking fully insulted. “I ain’t *praying*.”

April rolled her eyes with a chuckle. “I know that. I’m just saying the sentiment is kinda the same and no one thinks it’s stupid.”

The features on his face softened as he considered her words. “Wanna join me?"

“Umm, sure,” she agreed half-heartedly. There was no graceful way out of it and she knew she looked as uncomfortable as she had when she’d first walked in. Thankfully all he gave her was a questioning look, and she purposefully gave him no opportunity to prod her further, immediately crossing her legs and closing her eyes.

She inhaled deeply, taking in the silence of the room as she searched for something to focus on. That helped her through this sometimes. The faucet was dripping; she clung to its steady tempo and exhaled.

It wasn’t working. It rarely did anymore. She thought it was probably because she had already got herself too worked up by this point for anything to be effective. She was lost in the dark, but the void wasn’t silent. It seemed to get more deafening each time -

“Hey, you okay?” She suddenly felt her hand in his. She was shocked to realize she’d been crying and pulled away from him, vigorously wiping at her cheeks.

“I hate this,” she sniffed, hugging her knees to her chest.

“Hate what?” he asked, his eyes full of concern and confusion.

“Please just - ” She stopped, burying her face in her knees instead.

“What? Did I do something?” he implored.

“No, just - If I tell you don’t belittle me.” She looked up at him intently. “I’m not being silly or over-dramatic or - ”

“Why would I think that?” he asked, his voice trying to convey assurance and sincerity.

“...Splinter does,” she said unwaveringly. “I mean, he doesn’t say it... but he does.”

He looked entirely bewildered at that and she could tell he was at a loss for words. She sighed, knowing she couldn’t leave him like this. “I hate meditating. Hate is not a strong

enough word actually."

"O-okay," he stammered and somehow managed to look even more perplexed.

"Dammit, Raph!" she cursed, turning violently away from him.

"I mean, I get it," he added hastily, holding up his hand. "I'm not a fan of it myself,"

"It's for different reasons. You think it's a waste of time. You'd rather be doing something. Anything proactive. Besides, you have a hard time turning off your thoughts anyway," she blurted out in frustration.

"You're doing it again," he uttered waringly.

"I know! Dammit!" She released her knees, throwing up her hands in resignation. "I've tried explaining this to Splinter but he doesn't understand. Who would? Whenever I try to clear my mind all it does is let everyone else's in, like everyone's thoughts were air and I've just created a space for them to fill. You're right here in the room with me so of course I'm 'doing it again'," she added irritably.

She looked at him then and his features had softened in understanding. She felt herself calming down under his compassionate gaze.

"I'm sorry," she sighed and placed her hand back in his once more. "I didn't mean it like that. I know I told you to let me know. It's just hard."

"Have you explained it to Splinter just like that?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I don't know. It was early on in my training. I wasn't even sure what was going on at the time. But I could tell it wasn't up for debate. He said we all have our challenges to overcome."

"Well, I'll fucking tell him," he asserted with that familiar defiant gleam in his eye, and she couldn't help but smile.

His brow creased once more. "It wasn't me that made you cry though," he pressed.

She shook her head and sniffed once more. "Mikey's in his room. Mikey's in his room and he's lonely. He's been lonely since the moment we got here. Don's busy working on whatever. Casey's off doing odd jobs. You and I are... well, you know what you and I are doing. He's lonely and just trying to accept it and not annoy anyone."

"He's fine," Raph scoffed slightly.

"Didn't you hear me? He's not!" she snapped. "I'm not telling you what he's saying. I'm telling you what he's *feeling*. I just felt it through him. How can this be anything other than genuine?"

She took a deep breath, trying to center herself. "I'm sorry for interrupting you. I know what you were trying to accomplish here and I didn't mean to ruin it."

“April, *I* don’t even know what I was trying to accomplish here,” he snorted, shaking his head. He regarded Leo for a moment before rising to his feet. “Sounds like there’s another brother that needs me more right now anyway, right?”

“Oh Raph!” she croaked and took him by surprise by barreling into him, hugging him tightly. She’d forgotten how emotional she could get after these sessions.

“Geez April, I’m not saving a burning orphanage,” he teased, slightly embarrassed. “I was just going to ask him if he wanted to play a game up here with us. I-I really don’t want to leave Leo right now, y’know?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “It’d be amazing if he woke up while we’re all in here together.”

“Wouldn’t that be something?” he agreed. He cupped her chin with one large digit, tilting it up to him and kissed her softly and with it she felt the remnants of intrusive emotions melt away. She breathed deeply when he pulled away and she was herself again, left with her own thoughts, her own identity. “You okay?” he asked, their foreheads pressed together. “Anything else you want from me?”

“Yes,” she replied mischievously. “I want you to be *nice* to him while we play.”

“You crazy?” he quipped. “Then he’ll *know* something’s up.”

Left alone in the room, she scooted over to Leo. “Can you hear me?” she murmured, looking for a sign like the one Raph had gotten, but he was as still as ever. She closed her eyes and concentrated, searching for any mental sign she could pick up. She’d quietly tried this many times before, even though she wasn’t sure what to look for with someone in his condition. *Leo*, she called to him mentally. Her eyes flew open, startled. There was something there. Definitely something there. Nothing she could quite describe, but there was something, and it had responded to her.

“Any day now,” she whispered to herself.

Chapter 16

We should have done this a long time ago , Raph thought as April dug her fingers harder into his neck. His hands wrapped around her waist, her skin warm through her shirt. He knew why they hadn't, but shimmying up to April's bedroom after Mikey and Casey had gone to bed was so much easier than arranging their schedule around Donnie. Something about it had felt taboo though. There was no pretense about why they were getting together, nowhere for her to go to leave him for the night. Not that he'd stay...though he supposed he could. After all they'd slept together a couple of times already. But somehow, here in her room with the door closed, it felt undeniably different.

Innocently the lip of her shirt found its way over his hand and his fingertips grazed the bare skin of her waist. He was keenly aware of this new contact and tried to discern her response to it. She didn't tense up or pull away, just kept on kissing him so he determined she was either okay with it - or totally oblivious. Cautiously his hand crept upward, all the while trying to stay attuned to her reaction, ready to pull back if she gave the slightest indication he should.

Frankly, it was a lot to keep track of. Between wondering how far he should take it, contemplating what her skin would feel like *up there, and* trying to remain mindful of her receptivity, he had a hard time concentrating on what his mouth was doing. He was jolted when April manipulated her mouth against his in such a way it was clear she wanted him to be more attentive. He snapped his focus back to where their lips joined when he became suddenly aware that his hand had reached her bra.

His slow trek upward froze immediately and he tried to pick up any apprehension on her end. The movement of her mouth slowed thoughtfully as though she was trying to come to a decision. Then she abruptly pulled away from him.

He relinquished his hold on her immediately. "Sorry…Sorry," he stammered, holding up his hands apologetically and trying to convey his sincerity through his eyes.

Her eyes softened instantly. "Oh, Raph, no," she murmured, quickly reassuring him with a peck on the lips. He carefully did not respond to by touching her in any way. "It's not that at all. It's just…" She blushed deeply before, to his astonishment, she grabbed the bottom of her shirt and lifted it off over her head.

"There. That better?" she asked, trying to infuse some bravado in her voice, with only the pink of her cheeks betraying her.

At a loss for words, he found his head nodding before he was even aware of it. Tentatively, he allowed his eyes to roam where his hands were still too timid to go. He must have been making a spectacle of himself because she blushed even deeper, her head dipping bashfully to the side. The shift caused a bra strap to fall over her delicate shoulder and he felt his breath catch.

Hearing the hitch in his breath, she looked up at him. "Want this to go too?" she asked, nodding to the dangling strap.

For the second time, his head nodded of its own accord.

There was a quiet but unmistakable knock at the door and before she could even say anything, it started to slowly creep open. Raphael immediately leapt to the ceiling, his limbs splayed to prop himself up in the upper corner of the room.

April lunged at the door, pushing it closed before it had opened much more than a crack. "Donnie! I'm not decent!"

"It's Donnie?" he mouthed to her from across the room.

She nodded furiously, her back propped against the door, holding it shut.

"I'm sorry. I know it's late," Don's muffled voice came from the other side of the door and already Raph could hear the familiar tremor in his voice that indicated he'd been downing too many energy drinks again. "I assumed you'd be asleep and I wanted to wake you gently. It's just that it's important. Well, not so important it's urgent...I could have waited until tomorrow I suppose. But it's exciting! And-"

"It's fine. It's fine," April answered. "Just - I'll be right with you. Give me a second."

Raph silently returned to the floor and shot her a stern look. She shrugged at him grandly, mouthing, "What do you want me to do?" before putting her shirt back over her head. He grimaced even harder as she slunk out of the room without him.

"I thought I told Casey to stop getting you Monster drinks," he heard her whisper to Donnie before her voice disappeared altogether.

She lectured Don about getting some sleep, and even though he'd promised he'd be right up, she could tell he was too far in the zone, especially after she'd helped him with what he'd waken her up to show her.

April crossed the moonlit yard, tucking an errant strand of hair behind her ear, yawning. It was late. Donnie'd had her there for about an hour and she was crashing after the adrenaline rush of almost being caught. Even so, she suspected she had one more hurdle to cross before she could actually go to sleep.

She stepped into the house to find Raph in front of the TV. She'd expected he'd be up and she had intended to be firm, but he was sulking, the angriest pout she'd ever seen on his face. She couldn't help but find it adorable.

"You okay there, big guy?" she asked with a smirk.

"I'm gonna kill 'im," he growled.

“Well, that would solve one problem,” she chuckled. “Might open us up to some others though.”

“What was so fucking important it couldn’t wait?” he demanded, not playing along.

She sighed, running fingers through her hair with both hands. “He’s come up with something to scan my brainwaves. Like he talked about, remember? I asked him for help Raph. You expect me to get angry when he delivers?”

“And he couldn’t have shown you tomorrow?” he continued, undaunted.

“He could have, but he needed me there to help him calibrate it and you know how he gets when he’s on a roll. Don’t act like this is anything new,” she pleaded. “It was just... bad timing.”

He drummed his fingers thoughtfully on the arm of the sofa before deciding to drop it. He sat up straighter and looked at her with new eyes. “Soooo…”

“Nuh-uh,” she warned, wagging a finger at him. “I’ve had enough excitement for one night. I’m heading to bed. Alone,” she added with emphasis.

He crossed his arms over his plastron and sunk deeper into the couch once again. “Fine,” he grumbled irritably.

She rolled her eyes heavenward, heading toward the stairs undeterred. “They’re not going anywhere Raph,” she said, indicating towards her chest.

“They look like they’re going upstairs to me,” he protested.

“They’re gonna go away for a long time if you don’t stop complaining,” she threatened.

“Gonna kill ‘im,” she heard him mutter under his breath.

April smiled, feeling more confident in her abilities as they circled one another inside the barn. It was a welcome shelter from the heat of the encroaching summer. Raph came at her again. She successfully fended him off before sliding out of harm’s way once more and she wondered if it looked as graceful as it had felt. He’d been stepping up his game with her, now sparring with actual weapons in hand. She couldn’t deny that her tessen endowed her with more confidence. The weapon had chosen her after all and felt as though it were a natural extension of her own arm.

A feeling of boldness overcame her as he lunged for her again. She spun away from him in a feint, then elbowed him in the face, leaping away and quickly planting herself for his next attack. When she looked back, she saw him on all fours. He reached up to rub his jaw.

“Nice one,” he complimented.

Her eyes went wide and her mouth dropped. “I got you?” she squeaked in disbelief.

“Yeah, you tagged me good,” he confirmed with pride.

A lingering doubt that he was placating her faded away. That just wasn’t his nature and he’d never allow her to floor him like that. “I got you!” she sang out, jumping up and down triumphantly.

“Looks like I’ve been too soft on you,” he said, standing up. “But you know what that means?” he asked with a mischievous look in his eye. April froze as a smirk sidled up his face. “Payback.”

All training went out the window as April shrieked playfully and sprinted away from him as fast as she could. She made a bee-line for a rope that had once been used to help haul bales of hay and shimmied up it. He stopped under the rope and laughed, hands on his hips.

“Get down from there,” he demanded.

“Nonononono,” she giggled, freezing halfway up the rope. She wrapped her legs around it, clinging to it with all her might. Looking down at him, she bit her lip at the devilish grin he wore.

“Don’t make me come up and get you,” he teased.

April screamed again when she felt the rope go taut under his weight. Frantically she started climbing higher, the rope swaying under their combined weight. A sudden burst of light flooded the barn as the door swung open and she stopped and shielded her eyes with one hand.

“What’s with all the screaming?” Donnie asked, a thermos in one hand.

The rope went slack beneath her hands as Raphael dropped to the floor. She followed suit, landing next to him.

Putting two and two together, Don took quick inventory of his work table and added, “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t rough-house around my equipment.” April noticed how the comment was directed specifically to Raph and not her, despite the fact she’d been an obvious participant.

“We were just sparring and got a little carried away,” April explained before Raph could respond, and gently nudged him to leave.

He took the hint but grumbled to his brother as they passed him: “No one’s fucking with your stuff.”

Donnie grabbed his arm with clear intent. “April, I need to talk to my brother if you don’t mind.”

“S-sure,” she stammered. “I’ll catch you both later.” She locked eyes with Raphael as she exited the barn and the pleading look he’d given her along with the severity in Don’s voice

put her on edge. The thought of waiting to find out what was going on inside was too much to bear so instead she stayed out of sight and listened in.

“I know what’s going on,” Donatello announced, and her stomach turned.

“What’d ya mean?” Raph replied irritably. Despite his restraint she heard the nervous quiver in his voice, could sense his distress. Enough so that she almost burst back to his side, not wanting him to face this alone.

“I think it’s great that you’re both making good use of your time by training together,” he went on to explain and April felt an instant rush a relief overcome her even as she registered the resentment in his tone. “Just…be careful with her.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Raph demanded gruffly.

“I know how you can get,” Donnie continued. “I just don’t want her to accidentally get hurt because-”

“Does she look hurt to you?!” Raph barked.

April’s fists clenched. How was this any different to Don and Casey having it out about her - like she had no voice of her own? April sneered, threw up her hands, and returned to the house feeling equally irritable at both of them. Irritated at Don’s over-protectiveness. Irritated that Raph couldn’t just be relieved that Donnie wasn’t on to them like she’d feared.

The screen door slammed and she knew Raphael was in the house. She’d already busied herself in the kitchen, selecting what she was going to fix for dinner, and was filling the sink with water to do some dishes. He called her name, and any hope she had of him going upstairs and allowing them both time to cool off faded away.

“I’m in here,” she answered with a sigh.

“You won’t believe what Donnie just said,” he began immediately upon entering the kitchen.

“I heard,” she replied coldly, keeping her back toward him. “The beginning of it anyway.”

He paused, sensing her irritation. “You want to tell me what I did wrong? Or am I supposed to guess?”

April snatched up a plate and started to scrub. “We’re on thin ice as it is. You didn’t need to confront him like that.”

“ *Me?* ” he demanded.

“He’s just trying to - “

“I know what he’s just trying to do!” he snapped at the back of her head.

She placed the dish in the drying rack and picked up another. “We’re not doing this again today,” she declared unwaveringly over her shoulder.

“Course not. Why should we try to resolve any of this shit,” he sarcastically bit back. “But then it’s easier for you, isn’t it?”

“How the hell is this easier for me?” she challenged, turning to face him.

“How about because he’s not your brother. Or maybe because you’ve got fucking options if this doesn’t work out,” he snarled. “Take your pick.”

“How dare you,” she seethed through gritted teeth. The next thing she knew a plate had flown across the room and shattered against his plastron. He looked as equally shocked as she felt.

The world went hazy and then she seemed to step outside it as her vision tunneled. Angry as she was, she couldn’t believe she’d hurled the plate at him...the plate she was still holding in her hand. She gasped, dropping it to the floor. Pieces of it scattered across the linoleum, joining all the others.

The world came back into focus. She staggered and clutched the kitchen counter at what she saw. All manner of dishware was flying around the room and Raphael was frantically trying to avoid the onslaught.

“STOP IT! APRIL, CALM DOWN!” he pleaded as a glass crashed against his shell.

Desperately she tried; she closed her eyes and focused with all her might. But she didn’t know how she’d made it start much less how to end it. “I can’t! I can’t make it stop!” she cried. He was right; she needed to calm down. She knew that was the only thing that was going to work, and she knew it would be impossible with the mayhem going on around her. “Get out of the room!” she begged.

Instead, dodging projectiles, he crossed the room and embraced her. She sobbed, her body heaving against him as he held her tightly. “I gotcha,” he calmed her. The dishware hovered in midair and she clutched at him tighter as they came crashing down around them.

Breathing heavily, she looked over his shoulder and took inventory of the room with wide, darting eyes. “Oh my god,” she breathed, pulling away.

“No, it’s okay. It’s okay,” Raph assured her, wiping away a trail of tears from her face.

“It’s not!” she cried. “How’s this going to work if you have to worry about me throwing cutlery at your head any time we have an argument?”

“You didn’t do that,” he soothed.

“I could have!” she insisted.

“Well it’s a good thing I’m a ninja then,” he smirked.

She couldn't help but grin at that and some of the tension she'd been holding left her body. "Raph, I'm serious."

"I know and we're gonna figure this out. Just -" He held up his hands. "Don't move." He carefully crossed the room once again, returning with a broom.

"Your feet," she said worriedly, noticing that a neat semi-circle of debris had been left clear around her own as though some instinctual part of her knew enough to protect herself.

"I'm alright. I have thick skin," he offered, sweeping a path for her to the living room.

She was still shaking like a leaf. He sat with her on the couch and she rested her head against his shoulder. "Give me a minute," she said. Finding comfort in his arm wrapped around her, she closed her eyes and focused on her breathing, on the still and quiet that finally surrounded them.

A few minutes passed and she felt calmer, even though Raphael's words still hung heavily in her mind. She inhaled deeply and, without moving, whispered, "Is that why you're with me?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked,confused.

Her eyes remained closed, half-afraid of what he might say or what he might realize about himself. "Are you with me because you *don't* have any other options?"

"That's - no," he stammered. "That's not what I said." His arm tightened around her in assurance.

"What's the difference?" she breathed.

"Is this - is this something that's been bothering you?" he asked in a mystified tone.

She shrugged against him bashfully, feeling uncomfortably exposed. "We'll - I'll get Donnie and tell him I had another incident," she said, standing up. "Should explain this mess."

He grabbed her by the wrist. "No, I'm serious. You know that's not true, right? You can tell." He pointed to his head with his free hand.

She smiled softly at him and stroked his cheek. "Yes," she nodded. "I can tell."

"Must be nice," he commented. "Sometimes I wish I could do that."

"No, you really don't. That's why this *isn't* easier for me," she said bluntly.

He shot her a quizzical look. She felt uneasy returning to a topic that was always volatile between them. But he was right that she had been avoiding this too long. She sighed and sat down next to him again.

"It's not always good to know how people really feel about you," she explained. "Casey - Casey won't be so hard, I don't think. He cares about me a lot. He really does. But...I don't

think he'd have gotten as invested if it weren't for the competition."

"That's Casey all over," he agreed with a relieved smile that suddenly faded into a frown of concern. "...And Donnie?"

"You already know the answer to that, Raph," she murmured sadly. "It's why I avoid the subject. Why talking about it puts me on edge. Because I know. I really know..." she choked. "But awful as it's going to be I think it's time we talked to him."

She watched him closely, gauging his reaction, as he stared off in the distance. Then he nodded slowly and took a deep breath.

"Yeah…Yeah, I know."

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> Soooo....Is anyone still interested in this? I never meant to drop this fic for so long; it's always in the back of my mind. If you're still here, thank you for your patience. I can't promise when I'll have it completed (because life happens), but I do have a few chapters in the chamber awaiting a beta, so there should be more relatively soon.

“Do you think we should tell him how unsanitary it is swimming in there?” Donnie asked, though his tone seemed more amused than concerned. “It’s rife with bacteria.”

Raph watched as Mikey did another cannonball into the pond, splashing April in the process. She protested lightly, then caught Raph’s eye and gave him an encouraging wave. He and his brother both returned the gesture, Don probably assuming it was for him.

“How many times have we been forced to wade in sewage?” Raph eventually noted.

“Point taken.”

It had been April’s idea to bring them all out here, thinking it’d be a good place for him to talk things out with Don. She’d explained that a “public setting” (which, apparently, referred to common areas of the farm) might help discourage a scene being made and that by the trees he’d be able to pull Don away for some privacy too. He didn’t argue. It’s not like he had any ideas on how to make this any easier. They waited for a time and day when Casey wasn’t about. No need to tackle them both at the same time.

Even now, sitting next to him along the treeline, Raph had no idea how to begin. He’d played out the scenario many times in his head. It never went well. Mulling it over had not made him in the best of moods, which is probably why April had insisted on this outing sooner rather than later.

Raphael watched as Donnie took another bite of one of the sandwiches they’d brought in the picnic lunch. He personally hadn’t touched any of it; the thought of eating made him feel queasy.

At least Mikey was having a good time. He had changed tactics and was trying to coerce April into the pond with him, reaching out of the water and tugging her by the ankle.

“No! No! Stop!” April screeched in the distance, who must have agreed with Donnie’s assessment of the pond contents and looked none too thrilled at the prospect of being pulled in.

“KNOCK IT OFF MIKEY!” Raph and Don both shouted in unison.

“AWWWW!” their little brother groaned, releasing April’s foot and sinking back into the water.

They both shook their heads, chuckling, and, despite everything between them, the moment felt good. In spite of the tight quarters, he and Don had spent very little time together since arriving. He decided to take the opportunity to divulge a little more: “Besides it didn’t hurt me when I went swimming the last time I was here.”

Don paused thoughtfully and Raph felt like his stomach was full of rocks. “You’ve been out here before?”

“Uh...Yeah. April showed it to me,” he admitted. It was as good a place to start as any. The conversation wasn’t coming out of leftfield anyway. Now he’d ask him why and they could go from there.

“I owe you an apology for the other day,” he instead offered sincerely.

Or he could make this as hard as possible , Raph thought bitterly, with a heavy sigh he couldn’t contain.

“Don’t worry about it,” he replied, shrugging the comment off quickly in an attempt to get back on track.

“I think it’s great that you’ve been helping April with her training. I mean that,” Donnie quickly insisted. “But I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t resented it some. Stupid, I know.”

“It coulda been you,” Raph suggested before the multiple meanings of the phrase had even occurred to him.

“I suppose,” Don reflected. “It’s my own fault. It was just easier to get lost in my work. Focusing my thoughts on that was better than...thinking about anything else.”

“I get it,” Raph nodded.

“Besides, it’s no secret you’d be better at that sort of thing,” he stated with a complimentary tone, before adding, “And it was probably good for you too. April suggested as much to me when we first arrived here; that it was important for everyone to have something to do.”

“That sounds like her,” Raph agreed, trying to order the words correctly in his brain. *I’m with April. April and I are together. I’m so sorry.*

“I didn’t realize how long I’ve been withdrawn. The days just sort of bled together. But expecting Leo has got my spirits up,” he admitted and Raph had to agree that he hadn’t heard him sound this perky in a long while.

Great. Let’s kick him down when he’s starting to feel better . Raph tried to mask the bubbling feeling of resentment at being put in this position...despite knowing he’d been an equal player.

Right before their trip to the pond, he'd attempted to stall, though to what end he didn't know. Putting it off wasn't going to make things any easier. Still, Raph told April that he didn't want to leave Leo alone. If no one was there and he woke up… The thought of his wounded brother waking up alone and confused, wandering around and having no idea where he was or what was going on was too much to bear.

But nothing stopped her when she got an idea in her head. She'd found an old baby monitor in the attic and Donnie had been more than happy to alter it so that the reception range was boosted.

Raph caught himself absently listening to the soft, steady hum. If Leo were to wake up right now, that would get him out of this...for the time being.

"Does she ever talk about me?" Donnie suddenly asked and Raph felt like bashing his head repeatedly against the nearest tree.

"Sure," he sighed in exasperation, eyes shut tightly. *Fuck all of this.* He had fought valiantly to keep a neutral expression on his face, but ultimately had lost the battle.

"You don't have to bust my chops," Don chuckled, shaking his head. "I already know what you think. ...She's great though right?"

"Yeah. Great," he agreed with an unenthusiastic monotone, every intention he had of actually trying to get this over with squelched.

As they headed back home, it was no secret from anyone's demeanor that he hadn't talked with his brother as planned. He'd kept his distance from April the remainder of the outing, knowing she'd prod him otherwise. But as they neared the farmhouse, he knew she wasn't going to be avoidable for much longer.

"I wish we would have seen more animals," Mikey griped, kicking at the dirt.

"We might have," Donnie suggested. "If you weren't the loudest thing in a ten mile radius."

Raph watched as his brothers veered off toward the barn, before glancing at her nervously.

"Well, he doesn't look terribly broken up about it," she teased lightly, as though she had already expected this outcome, a thought that made him angry at first, but he wasn't sure why. Ultimately, it felt pointless to dwell.

Sitting down on the porch swing, she offered him a consoling smile, indicating for him to join her by tapping on the seat next her. This wasn't a conversation he could avoid, not that he had expected to.

"I couldn't go through with it," he sighed, sitting next to her with an accompanying creak of old wood.

"No kidding," she offered, sarcastically.

“You weren’t there!” he insisted, irritation getting away from him. “Trust me; he made it impossible.”

“It’s never going to be easy, Raph,” she stated sympathetically. “But the longer you put it off the harder it will be.”

He threw her a sharp glare in response and she immediately understood.

“I know I contributed to that...to us putting this off, I mean,” she added. “And I’m sorry. I’ll do it instead of you, if it makes it easier.”

“NO!” he immediately insisted. The very idea that she’d be the one to reveal all this to Don, while he found some place to hide, made his skin crawl. “I just...I need the right opening. I’ll-I’ll try again tomorrow.”

“Alright,” she agreed airily, her eyes lightly closed as she enjoyed the warm breeze.

He studied her face, marveling with how at ease April seemed, as though she didn’t have a care in the world. There were times when this demeanor had irritated him, but he knew better now of the personal burdens she carried. He couldn’t help but wonder at how easily she remained centered when he’d all but given up on mastering it himself.

“How can you be so calm about everything?” he asked genuinely, realizing after the words were out that if he had asked the same question of her a month ago, it would have been with a condescending tone. Now, he felt more comfortable speaking his mind around her openly without feeling defensive.

“Raph, you know better than anyone that I’m not,” she replied with equal sincerity, opening her eyes with a small sigh.

That much was true. It hadn’t occurred to him until just then, but his brothers would probably be shocked to see April in the state he’d seen her when she’d hit her limit. The realization only made him feel closer to her.

“No, I know,” he agreed. “It’s just...you usually are. You seem like you have it all together. You take everything in stride.”

“Raph, in the little time you’ve known me I’ve been kidnapped by alien robots, had my dad taken from me, become a target of an underground ninja organization, and found out that I’m not entirely human.” She turned, looking at him earnestly. “But you know what? I’ve survived it. We all have. I’ve learned things are going to happen beyond my control and the only thing I can do is respond to them the best I can as they happen.” April rested her head against his shoulder, taking his hand into hers. “And this thing with Donnie...it’s going to work itself out too. You’ll see.”

“I suppose it’s too much to hope that you’re slightly clairvoyant too,” he teased.

She chuckled, “That’s all I need!”

Raphael hadn't known that the combination of intense boredom and anxiety he was experiencing could possibly exist. He listened to his brother drone on, not understanding even a third of what he was saying, but, more importantly, he still found it impossible to broach the topic of April.

"Mutagen, as we know, is very unpredictable in an uncontrolled environment. But, after successfully developing a retro-mutagen, I feel a lot more comfortable working with it," he explained, finally getting to the Plain English portions. "Which is why I'm confident that this will help Leo." Donnie revealed a vial containing a blueish-green liquid.

Raph eyed it skeptically. "What's he supposed to do with that?"

"Ingest it, of course," Don answered.

He'd come out to the barn to try and hash things out with his brother, that way Don would be in a place he felt comfortable. He had gotten little sleep the night before picturing how it'd play out, starting with Donnie being irritated at interruption from his work. But it hadn't played out that way. On the contrary, he seemed happy for the company.

In many ways, he'd felt isolated ever since they'd arrived at the farmhouse, his brothers and Casey not trying to reach out to him at all. In retrospect, was it any wonder April and he had gotten so close? She was the only one that had made any effort.

But Donnie excitedly explaining the various things he'd been working on made him realize that it went both ways. He hadn't tried either. And April had said the same thing about Mikey feeling alone. Maybe they had all been here, alone together.

All this overthinking wasn't helping him get the job done. Even so, it felt near impossible to begin when his brother seemed so happy just to have him around. *I didn't really come out here to hang out, bro. Just wanted to let you know I'm with the girl you're crazy about. Have a nice day.*

He glanced at the medicinal mutagen again instead. It glowed in an unsettling way.

"You sure that stuff isn't going to fuck him up?"

"Raph," Donnie sighed, "Why is it you always have to second guess everything I try to do? How many successes will it take before you're convinced I know what I'm doing?"

It wasn't an unfair statement, he decided internally, though his mouth said, "It's not just me. Leo does it too."

"Don't remind me," Donnie agreed. "At least you come by it honest. You're skeptical by nature."

All this sitting around doing nothing but listening was beginning to get to him and it didn't help that he was tied up in knots over what he needed to say. Restless, he got up and went to the truck Casey had been working on, sliding under on his back to get a look at his progress.

“So,” he continued, reaching for a socket wrench. “Since you think it’ll help, why don’t we just give it to him now? Maybe it’d help him wake up.”

“I considered it, but I’d rather not. In his condition, he wouldn’t be able to tell me if he was having some kind of unforeseen reaction. How’s that rust bucket coming?”

“Case may not know much, but he knows his way around an engine. Not sure that this thing ever had much hope though,” he admitted, adding after a moment, “…Weren’t you also working on something for April?” At least he managed to bring up her name, maybe he could somehow segue from there.

“Yes. But I put it on pause and redirected myself back to this when it looked like Leo would be waking up soon,” he answered, before asking hurriedly, “Why? Has she been asking about it? I’m all finished here so I can get back on it right away.”

He seemed genuinely concerned he may be disappointing her, which was ridiculous. It wasn’t like he was on any time table to work miracles. Even if he were, April would put Leo’s well-being first anyway.

It brought to mind all the times they’d unfairly push him to ‘work faster’ in the heat of the moment. But, more to the point, it only reminded him of how much he desired to please her.

Telling Casey would be easier , Raph sighed to himself. *We’d just fight it out and be done with it* .

He pulled himself back out from under the truck. “Donnie listen,” he said looking at his anxious brother pulling out another random device, presumedly the one he’d been working on for April. “…I was just asking. April is the most patient person I know. Don’t worry about it.”

She’d been anxiously awaiting Raph’s return from his talk with Donnie and found herself cleaning out the fridge in a fit of nervous energy, taking a brief moment to give Ice Cream Kitty a pat in the freezer. Most of what she tossed were expired condiments and well-intentioned leftovers that got consistently overlooked for junk food.

When he finally walked in, one look at his face told her he still hadn’t gone through with it. He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again without a word.

She sighed, but decided not to push, understanding how hard this had to be on him. “You know what you need?”

“To fast forward in time to after all this is over?” he suggested bitterly.

“You need a sparring session,” she replied, ignoring his comment.

“Sure. Fine. Whatever,” he conceded, leaving the room.

She knew he was going into a dark place, but also knew the best way for him to work through it was physically. She closed the refrigerator door and went to collect Mikey from the living

room.

“Sparring session out front, Mikey. Go get Donnie.”

“Alright, my ninja!” he agreed enthusiastically, turning off the TV and sprinting outside.

It didn’t take long before she wondered if it shouldn’t have just been kept between her and Raph. Casey and Don were desperately trying to one up each other in an attempt to garnish her attention and it wasn’t exactly conducive to her concentration. She breathed deeply, blocking them out and focusing on her target.

April threw her tessen at Raph, who only just managed to dodge, and effortlessly caught the bladed fan upon its return. After several attempted strikes between the two of them, he managed to knock her over with a leg sweep. Instead of landing flat, she performed a back handspring and socked him square on the jaw and he fell to the ground.

“I'm almost a full-on Kunoichi!” she declared victoriously, in an attempt to point out just how much she was not paying any mind to the others. She half-suspected that the reason a punch had landed at all meant that Raph was equally distracted by their buffoonery.

“Aw, yeah!” Mikey enthused directly into Raph’s face, “Gotta be quick if you wanna be hanging with the ninjas, dog!”

She noticed that Donnie and Case were still going at it, with little finesse at this point, though that was to be expected with Casey Jones in the mix.

“Okay, you two. Enough!,” she chided. “You guys are acting like a bunch of caged animals.”

“We're just blowing off a little steam, Red,” Casey replied.

“Yeah, things are just kind of tense lately. Right, old friend?” Donnie added and she wondered if he weren’t enjoying their rivalry just as much as Casey did at this point based on his snide tone at the end, not to mention the amount of time they’d been spending together of late. They’d become the very embodiment of frenemies.

“You got that right, old pal,” Casey agreed, matching his inflection. “We're all just a little frustrated.”

Raph didn’t try to hide his irritation as he left the group and she imagined he was as frustrated with Don and Casey’s show-boating as she was. That in combination with the looming fallout he faced with his brother solidified that she should have thought better of inviting the others.

April watched Raph stalk back into the farmhouse and knew he’d be going up to sulk next to Leo. She decided to give him some time to decompress before checking in on him. It’s not like telling him what he already knew he had to do was going to help, but that was the frustrating part: She was used to having answers, but with this…she wasn’t sure how to help him.

After about an hour, she grabbed the board game Sorry and went to see if she could at least be good company for him, providing some kind of distraction.

“How you holding up?” she asked, joining him in the bathroom and clicking the old door shut behind her.

“You want to know what I’ve realized?” he began what was clearly a speech prepared for her whenever she showed up. “Hanging out with Don or Case is fine. They’re even somewhat tolerable together…until *you’re* in the mix.” He looked at her pointedly and then back to Leo. “Then they’re just so fucking annoying!”

“Welcome to my world,” she agreed, putting aside the board game and sitting next to him on the adjacent bean bag.

“Did you see them out there?” he exclaimed. Before they'd become a couple, she would have thought he was trying to get a rise out of her. In truth, before he might have been doing just that. But now, she took it for the venting it clearly was.

“Raph, it wasn’t even all that bad today,” she rebutted. “It’s just getting under your skin more than usual because of…this whole situation. But you know you really aren’t allowed to complain about it anymore. This can all stop as soon as you want it to.”

“You make it sound so fucking easy!” he shouted in a way that told her this was going to go beyond simple venting very soon.

“I didn’t suggest it was easy,” she returned coolly. “I’m simply saying you have control now. I’m letting you take the driver’s seat on this. And you *don’t* need to raise your voice at me. I’m on *your* side.”

As she watched him try to recompose himself, she couldn’t help but note that as much as he fought for leadership roles in the past, he never seemed to enjoy it as much as thought he would when given the chance. She wondered why he hadn’t yet realized that not enjoying being told what to do did not necessarily equate to wanting the responsibility yourself. Almost as soon as the thought left her head, he suggested putting all this back on her to some degree.

“Why don’t…why not just tell him you’re not interested in him first. Then it might make things easier?”

“I can do that,” she conceded. “I’ve even already considered it. But…have you thought the idea all the way through?”

He sat quietly, clearly indicating that he had not and it was just a random thought, an ideation built from desperation.

“It would mean hurting him twice instead of getting it all out there at once. Do you really think putting Donnie through this twice is the right thing to do?”

“No,” he admittedly somberly.

They sat in silence once more. She couldn't begin to imagine how hard this was on him and desperately wanted to find a way to make it easier. She understood why it was important for him to be the one to approach Donnie, but she couldn't help wishing he'd just let her do it.

"I know you don't want me to do it-" she tried saying, experimentally.

"Absolutely not!" he declared before she could finish her thought.

"But what do you think about us doing it together?"

He quietly contemplated her suggestion and she could tell that a part of him wanted to agree to it, but ultimately he shook his head. "…No, I think…If I were him I wouldn't want you there…It would make me feel…"

"Vulnerable," she finished for him.

"Yeah," he concluded, sadly.

"Listen, Raph-," she tried to console him, taking his hand in hers.

"April I…I just need to be alone right now." She felt him squeeze her hand in a reassuring way. "I just need to think."

"I understand." She gave him an affectionate peck on the cheek. "But you let me know if you need me."

He nodded as she headed back into the hallway and returned to the mundanity of keeping house. She didn't take it personally. Honestly, she had no idea what she could say to make the situation any easier anyway, and she sensed he knew that.

Raphael had opted to isolate himself most of the day and she thought it best to respect his wishes, even after dinner had been prepared. Instead of bothering him, she made him a plate and stashed it in the fridge for him.

The rest of the family had gathered for dinner though and afterwards were being held hostage by Mikey's current obsession: Crognard.

"We literally have endless channels to choose from," Donnie complained. "How is this your favorite show?"

"Because it's awesome," he retorted, as though that would be obvious to anyone.

"Well, with that bit of witty repartee, I'm thoroughly convinced," Don returned sardonically.

April was too distracted to take much note in their back and forth. Glancing upstairs, she wasn't quite sure what it was, but something suddenly felt off.

"GUYS! GUYS! GET UP HERE!" Raph's voice thundered down to them, drowning out the television.

She now had no doubt what was happening. None of them did by how quickly everyone scrambled to their feet and raced up the stairs.

Chapter 18: Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

> I've had several readers ask about whether I'll be sticking to canon now that we've entered familiar territory. The short answer is 'sort of'. Eventually, I'd have to break from canon anyway, due to the nature of the story I'm trying to tell. However, until I get to that crossroad, I theoretically could stay strictly within canon. I, in fact, tried to do so. However, forcing it was really clashing with my writing style which was frustrating and is one of the reasons there's been such a long hiatus. I've decided to approach it in the way that feels the most natural for me. All the major beats you expect will still be there, but it may not be verbatim. Some chapters will be closer to the source material than others, but it should all still be very recognizable.

"I know what you'd say. You'd say to suck it up and do what I know needs to be done."

Raph could hear the bitterness of his own voice as he vented to his unconscious brother. It didn't phase him. He was pretty sure Leo couldn't hear him anyway.

"But telling someone to do something is so much easier than actually doing it. That's what you never get. You make it look easy because you just *detach* yourself from everything. Well, I can't do that. I'm *super attached* to all this shit."

He glanced at his motionless brother, who refused to even give him the satisfaction of a decent argument. A slow, steady drip from the sink faucet keeping time to his thoughts emphasized the silence.

"No, that's not *actually* what you'd do," he stated, accusatorially, "Is it?" Raph felt his anger rising and turned to face Leo, resentment fueling his rant. " *You'd* tell me to break it off with her, for the good of the family. Like April's not *already* part of it." He pointed his finger into his brother's face, as if he had just said all that to Raph, who had no doubt he would. "Well, you can go to hell."

There was a sudden and massive shift in the tub, water sloshing over the sides, as a disoriented Leonardo tried to move, then lay still once more.

Raphael jumped to his feet, scarcely able to breathe, staring wide-eyed at his brother and the disturbed water that proved he hadn't been imagining things.

"Raph…is that you?" Leo's voice came meekly, finally triggering Raph into action.

"GUYS! GUYS!" he shouted to anyone within earshot, knowing it would carry. "GET UP HERE!"

“Raph?” Leo hoarsely called out again, eyes blinking against what had to feel like a painfully bright light to him after months in darkness.

“Yeah, it’s me,” he answered, kneeling beside the tub and taking his hand. “Don’t worry, bro. We’re gonna take care of you.”

After lifting Leo out of the tub and helping him downstairs, they all circled around expectantly as Donnie started his examination.

“So we've been here for three months? I've been out that long?” Leo asked in disbelief, trying to take in his new surroundings of the farmhouse.

“You had us worried sick, Leo,” April replied. “Raph barely slept.”

“It was nothing,” he threw back flippantly, feeling it to be something of an overstatement, while still acknowledging he’d been the one keeping a vigil over him *far* more than the others.

Raph watched with concern as Donnie explained the extensive nature of Leo’s injuries, noticing that every movement seemed to cause his brother discomfort.

“Here,” Don offered, pouring some of the medication he’d created into a spoon. “Take some more of my special patented mutagen medicine. You'll be healed in no time.”

Leo looked at it skeptically, but swallowed it all the same with a grimace. “That tastes like it's supposed to come *out* of me, not go *into* me.”

It was difficult for Raph to see Leo like this, having been so focused on just hoping he’d *wake up* , that he hadn’t much considered what the aftermath could look like. The look on Donnie’s face told him that he was contemplating the same thing.

Swooping in next to Leo on the couch, he put a reassuring arm around him. “First thing tomorrow, we're gonna start training again, you and me. I'll have you on your feet in no time, bro.” The words were almost an act of defiance against what they were all fearing, but Leo smiled back at him in acceptance.

“I’m going to get you something to eat,” April told Leo in a soothing tone. “Just try to rest.”

Raph watched her disappear into the kitchen as his brothers and Casey tried to catch Leo up on everything he’d missed. Leo didn’t know what had happened to Splinter and, frankly, he wasn’t eager to relive it. Instead, he mumbled something about getting him a drink and joined April in the kitchen.

“Hey,” she said when he walked in, surprisingly sober given the good news of the day. Her assessment of Leo must have been equally bleak.

“Hey,” he replied back, lamely.

“I’m just making him some soup,” she explained, stirring some kind of broth in a pot. “He hasn’t had solid food in months and I don’t know what introducing him back to it too quickly might do.”

“That’s smart,” he replied genuinely, though his cloudy tone must have bothered April enough to acknowledge it.

“Raph.” She stopped attending to the stove, walked over, and wrapped her arms around him. “He’s awake. Let that be enough for now.”

“Oh really?” he snarked, returning her embrace despite his mood. “Is that why you sound so chipper?”

“Fair enough,” she agreed, her voice brightening. “We just have to give him time to recover. And, speaking of, go easy on him tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry. I’m just going to get him moving, that’s all,” he promised, pressing a quick kiss to the top of her head.

“It’s a good idea,” she agreed, releasing him after another squeeze and returning to the stove. “He’s been stagnant for too long. Have you given the sleeping situation any thought?”

“What do you mean?”

“Big as this place is, we’re running out of extra rooms and you’ve seen his leg. He can’t be going up and down the stairs regularly right now,” she said, trying to lead him to the next most logical point.

“Not *my* room,” he huffed, grimacing. “Does that mean I have to share with someone?”

“You get a choice between Mikey, Casey, or Donnie. Lucky, lucky you,” she teased.

“That’s… *How?* I’m supposed to be dumping all this shit on Don and Case and then you expect me to *share a room* with one of them?”

“Sounds like that leaves Mikey then,” she replied, having gone back to stirring the soup.

He let out a loud, irritated groan to the universe. She chuckled softly in return and he decided she was enjoying this whole situation too much for his liking.

“Laugh it up, April. The only reason we’ve gotten away with half the shit we have was because we were able to get some privacy,” he pointed out. “This is going to make that *a lot* more difficult.”

“Sounds like you’re in for a really rough time,” she replied, full of mock sympathy, while failing to hide her smile.

“Don’t act like you don’t care,” he scoffed, swatting playfully at her butt as she moved to retrieve a bowl from a nearby cabinet. She did give a small laugh, but continued her feigned indifference and returned to stirring.

“Losing our nighttime escapades *may* have crossed my mind,” she admitted after a moment.

“What would you say to *us* sharing a room instead?” he asked suggestively, smirking.

“I’d ask what your mother would think,” she replied quickly, staring back at the soup, blushing. “If you had one.”

“Seriously, April,” he begged. “There *has* to be some way around this.”

“There is that rollaway bed in the closet,” she suggested after some brief consideration, ladelling soup into the bowl. “And we never use the dining room anyway.”

“I’ll get it set up for him right away,” he vowed, grateful.

“Come on, Leo,” Raph encouraged over his shoulder, as they approached the rocks at the edge of the creek. Taking the lead meant not constantly watching his brother struggle and suffer to do something as simple as walk. “You gotta build up those muscles! You've gotten super weak.”

They’d spent the previous evening doing everything in their power to make Leo comfortable. Raph, Casey, and Mikey removed the table from the dining room, managing to get it into the already crowded attic. They pushed the chairs against the wall, opened the rollaway bed, and tried to make it homey. Donnie spent the time fashioning him a crutch, as the most severe of his injuries seemed to reside in his right leg, while April attended to Leo. Once his room was ready, both Don and April insisted they all leave him to get plenty of rest.

Leaving him alone was surprisingly the hardest part. Even though he suspected the fear was unwarranted, Raph couldn’t help but worry that Leo would go to sleep and not wake up the next day, putting them right back where they were. He wanted to wake him a few times the next morning, just to be sure, but April insisted that he leave him be.

It was a relief when he finally did wake up and, while Raph had every intention of taking things at his brother’s pace, Leo was the one that had been eager to get out of the house.

“Don't rub it in,” Leo muttered in reply, before giving a cry of pain, falling forward, and clutching his knee. Raph turned immediately from where he had leapt onto the rocks, saw his brother grimacing on the bank, and momentarily considered whether he should help him up or let him push through on his own.

“I don't think I'm…I don't think I'm ever gonna be the same again,” Leo struggled to say, clutching his leg and wincing with every move.

To Raph, it was the worst thing that could have come out of Leo’s mouth, having his own fears confirmed by the one person he expected to persevere through any odds.

“Don't talk like that! That's not the Leo I know,” Raph insisted. “Now, come on. Let's cross this creek.” He remembered his talk with April last night and didn’t intend to take them much

further out, but didn't think it'd be a good idea to leave Leo on such a negative note. He'd push just a little further and then they'd turn back.

Leo slowly rose to his feet and, after what seemed to be a jolt of pain, took another drink of the medicine Don had given him. If anything he looked even worse than before. Raph continued onto the rocks and, not hearing his brother following, turned back to see him still standing on the bank holding the bottle.

"Leo?" Raph called out with concern, seeing him mutter something and his face twist unpleasantly. Leo then dropped the bottle, clutched at his stomach, turned his back to him, and vomited onto the ground.

"You okay, Leo?" Raph asked, rushing back to him and helping him to his feet again, supporting his weight.

"I think it's that medicine Donnie gave me," he replied weakly. "I'm not feeling too good."

"Come on. Let's get back to the farmhouse," Raph said, keeping a supportive hand on his shoulder as they crested the small hill. "You need some rest."

They hadn't gone terribly far, but the closer they got to the house, the more Leo struggled until Raph was practically carrying him. He had words for Donnie once they got back.

Almost on cue, Don rushed toward them as they neared the house. "What on earth are you doing out here?" he exclaimed with worry. "I've been looking for you everywhere!"

"It's that medicine you gave him!" Raph yelled. "You said that stuff wouldn't fuck him up!"

"Can this wait until we get him inside?" Donnie asked, supporting Leo by the other arm as they both brought him over the threshold. April jumped up from the couch after she saw Leo being practically dragged in. They sat him down gingerly in an armchair as Donnie started yet another examination.

"What part of 'you need rest' was confusing for you?" Doctor Donnie chastised, poking around his patient and jotting chicken scratch onto a notepad.

"We just went for a short walk," Leo explained.

"I don't recall saying you need rest *unless* you want to go for a short walk," Donnie continued, undaunted. "Your body needs time to heal, Leo."

"I've been immobile for three months," Leo replied, sounding weak and exasperated at the same time.

"That's precisely my point," Donnie insisted. "You haven't been awake for even twenty-four hours after a three month *coma* . You'll be immobile for however much longer you need to be!"

"That doesn't explain this," Raph persisted. "You said the medicine would help him."

“What happened?” Donnie asked, looking sideways at Raph with irritation.

“He blew chunks! That’s what happened!” he answered, angered by what he thought to be a flippant response to something serious.

Don looked back to Leo instead of replying to Raph. “You feel nauseous?” he asked.

Leo nodded, closing his eyes.

“Well, that’s to be expected. Anything else feel off?”

“You mean aside from the pain?” Leo replied, clearly annoyed.

“Yes, besides that.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, that’s to be expected?!” Raph shouted, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

“For god’s sake Raph, have you ever watched a *single* pharmaceutical commercial? There’s a *litany* of possible side effects listed at the end and possible nausea is almost *always* among them. It doesn't mean the medicine is ineffective. Where is it?”

“I think I dropped it when I got sick,” Leo admitted, fingers tightening around his cane.

“Fantastic,” Don sarcastically muttered, scribbling on his notepad again.

“I’m going to go get him some more soup,” April stated. “It might be the only thing he’ll be able to keep down right now.”

“Good idea,” Donnie agreed, then returned to Leo. “And *you* need to stay off your feet.”

“Well, maybe I’ll just sleep *all day* ,” Leo threw back bitterly.

“Actually, that would be a great idea,” Don replied, unphased, already back to his notes and leaving.

Raph understood his brother’s frustrations. Like him, being physical was just an important part of his life. They could enjoy TV, video games, reading, or some other static activity… for a time. But they weren’t built to just veg out all day.

Leo clearly didn’t look interested in the soup April brought him, but it didn’t take much coaxing from her for him to try to force some down. Raph helped him back to his makeshift room, but his brother continued to look depressed. It wasn’t just the injury, Raph knew. They’d all had months to come to terms with losing their home, their father, but it was all fresh for Leo. He knew his brother well enough to know that he’d prefer to be proactive about their situation, but instead found himself stuck in a position where he couldn’t do anything more than rest.

Unsure of how to make things better, and fairly sure he'd helped make things *worse* so far, Raph floundered at what to say or do next. Thankfully, April reappeared carrying the board game Clue with a knowing smile.

"Might as well do something while we're doing nothing," Raph said amicably, remembering April's words when approaching him the same way months ago.

Leo sat at the head of the bed, while April and Raph pulled up two of the dining room chairs that had been pushed into the corner of the room, using the remainder of the bed for a gaming surface.

"So this is what passes for a good time around here?" Leo asked with a smirk. "Is it always this-"

"Quiet?" she offered helpfully.

"Boring?" Raph finished for him.

"Yeah," Leo replied.

"Yes," they both answered simultaneously.

"The quiet takes getting used to," Raph added, recalling the constant sounds of the street overhead that they were accustomed to.

"Personally, I think we all deserve a bit of boring after what we've been through," April countered. "But if you need a little excitement, we've got a full-on murder mystery in front of us." She swept her hands over the gameboard.

"What else have I missed?" Leo asked with a chuckle. Raph stopped to consider all the connotations of the question, before April answered instead.

"Raph's been training me. It's been going pretty well."

" *Really* ?" Leo exclaimed incredulously.

"You have a problem with that?" Raph asked warily.

"Not at all. I think it's great actually…just a little surprised," he admitted.

Any other time he might have pushed further, but given his brother's mood he chose to try and let it go. Besides, he guessed the meaning behind it: Leo was surprised it was him and not Donnie. If he were to push, it'd only lead Leo to ask questions he didn't want to answer.

"She's come a long way pretty quickly," he said instead.

"That's because I have such a good teacher," she complimented, with an affectionate squeeze of Raph's hand, then turned to Leo. "He's a real slave-driver."

"Hey, you agreed to the no bitching rule from the start," he reminded her, smiling.

“I don’t bitch!” she insisted, her voice going up an octave.

“You don’t,” he agreed. “Much.”

“Keep it up, Raphael,” she declared with menace. “I have a candlestick in this library with your name on it.”

They were both laughing at this point. Raph, remembering Leo was there, turned to him and said, “I give her a compliment and you see how she treats me?”

He watched as his brother’s eyes darted between them suspiciously and decided to focus his attention back on the game board. He would have thought he was maybe being paranoid, but April also immediately grew quiet and refocused on the game.

“Colonel Mustard in the ballroom with a knife,” Leo eventually guessed.

“Go fish,” April answered and Raph stifled a snicker behind his mouth.

It was unseasonably cold that day and the temperature had dropped even more that evening. A last desperate gasp from winter before it gave up altogether.

They all huddled together in the living room. While technically air conditioned, the drafty house lacked the upkeep it once had to hold heat in properly. But being together in one room with the fireplace did the job sufficiently. She suspected that wasn’t the real reason everyone had congregated though and that they were all just happy to have Leonardo back with the group again.

It did leave one glaring omission though.

“I just can't stop thinking about Master Splinter,” Leo uttered sadly as April brought him a hot mug of tea. “Maybe he's not really gone.”

It had to be hard for him, she thought, having just found out yesterday. They’d all had months to process.

“We saw it happen,” Donnie practically whispered back, clearly still finding it had to talk about. “Shredder threw him down a drain pipe.”

“Maybe Leo's right,” April suggested, sounding surprisingly optimistic even to her ears. “I mean, Splinter was a great ninja Master.”

“The greatest in a century,” Raphael agreed, though his voice did not match hers in tone.

She wasn’t sure what made her entertain the notion that Splinter may be okay, particularly when she thought back to her temperament when they’d first arrived here. Maybe it was Leo’s revival. Maybe it was just a case of time helping her heal. Maybe it was because she’d

seen things far more miraculous happen in the past year. Whatever it was, it didn't sound like the most outlandish suggestion.

"Hey, dudes, the show's starting," Mikey announced, interrupting her train of thought in what she assumed was his way of avoiding a painful memory.

Suddenly the power went out, immediately followed by a wail from Michelangelo upon losing his beloved friend, the television.

"Aw, man," Casey groaned in frustration, making her wonder if he was feigning his distaste for Crognard. "You gotta be kidding me."

"It's just a blown fuse," Donnie said, standing up and grabbing a flashlight, heading toward the fuse box.

Before he could leave, a random draft of wind drifted down the chimney and blew out the fire completely. They peered curiously at the dark fireplace.

"Great" Raph grunted. "Looks like we need more firewood."

He volunteered himself for the job without saying a word, heading out of the room. Unseasonably cold did not mean freezing and the fire was more nice than necessary. She heard the front door open and close, wondering if he simply needed an excuse to get a breather from the conversation.

Raph had been gone too long, which would be enough reason to worry, but it was more than that: April could feel something was *wrong* . It wasn't anything she could quite explain, but it was as though some vague sense of his presence was always there, perhaps because they'd become so close. She hadn't noticed it until now, but that's only because she could *feel* his absence. That presence *wasn't* there.

She searched out Leo and found him alone in his newly designated room, looking as though he were debating settling in for the night.

"Leo, Raph still isn't back," she said.

"I noticed," he replied. "Wish he'd move it along. I'd like to go to sleep knowing he's home."

"I'm getting really worried," she elaborated, pulling at her fingers and absently glancing through the window outside, hoping to see some sign of him.

"It's only been about an hour. Do you think talking about Splinter upset him?" he asked.

"No, I think something may have happened to him," she answered quickly. "We need to go look for him."

"Happened to him? What could happen to him out here?"

“Leo, please!” she snapped. “I know something is wrong! I can sense it!”

“Sense it?” He looked at her sharply with confusion. “What does that-“

“If you aren’t going to help, I’ll look for him on my own!” she declared, turning to leave.

“Hold on. Hold on,” he stopped her, hobbling out of bed. “I’m sure he’s okay, April, but I’ll get the others just in case.”

The family reconvened outside and both Mikey and Casey were shouting Raphael’s name at the top of their lungs to the starless night sky, but deep down she knew that wouldn’t work.

“Don’t you think he’d answer?” she asked Leo and there was a flicker of concern that crossed his face.

“Alright, we split up,” he decided. “April and Casey, you guys take that way. Mikey and Donnie, you take that way.”

“Split up? Are you loco, homey?” Mikey demanded incredulously.

“April and Casey go off alone? Together?” Donnie questioned him, though clearly motivated by something else entirely.

“Mikey and Donnie, you take *that* way,” Leo repeated more forcefully, pointing in the direction he wanted them to go. She imagined he was irritated that his first orders since waking up were being questioned, more so by the two that were usually the least likely to do so.

Donnie groaned in frustration, but did as he was instructed. Casey, looking triumphant, put his arm around her shoulder and started to guide her in the opposite direction.

“What about you?” April asked Leo.

He looked defeatedly down at his leg. “I'll wait at the farmhouse in case Raph comes back. I won't be much help out there, anyway.”

Typically the nonsense between Donnie and Casey, especially over something as serious as finding Raph, would bother her enough to have let them both have it. But she was too focused on trying to find any trace of him, some kind of mental signature.

Besides, she knew that *she* was the only one really worried and the rest of them suspected that he was just fine. If they truly thought Raph was in trouble, fighting over her would be a much lower priority.

April opened her mind as much as she could to her surroundings, even though she wasn’t quite sure what she was doing. She did her best to simulate what happened to her when she attempted to meditate, letting everything in without trying to filter anything out.

The deeper into the woods they went, the darker it became, the trees closing in around them, blocking the little moonlight given on the cloudy night. It was eerily quiet, which helped her focus even though she found it unsettling. She had always found the woods surrounding the farmhouse spooky at night, but the silence pronounced it all the more. It was as though all the animals knew they needed to hide from something.

“I've always hated these woods at night,” she said, hoping that voicing these thoughts out loud would make her feel better. “When I was a kid, I was sure monsters were gonna creep out and eat me.”

Scared by a shifting tree branch and a swooping bat, she yelled in fright and Casey gave a chuckle.

“No monsters here, Red, unless you count Casey Jones,” he declared with as much swagger as he could muster, before letting out a mighty howl into the night sky.

She punched him in the side, just hard enough to let him know that he wasn’t helping and he grunted in return. “Nice. Good arm,” he complimented while somehow still sounding put out. “So what's the deal, red? You've been cold as ice to me ever since we left New York.”

“That's not true. It's just…,” April stammered, wondering if she had come across that way these past few months, even as she contradicted him. Admittedly she had been keeping more of a distance, for the same reason she had been with Don, but now was not the time or place to hash that out. “What do you want, Casey? Our families are gone, most likely mutated. New York is alien-“

She grimaced, struck by a sudden wave of pain and grabbed her head.

“What is it?” Casey asked with concern. “You gettin’ some bad vibes again?”

When opening up her mind, she had hoped to pick up on Raph, obviously, but wouldn’t have been surprised if she only managed to sense the other search party. Instead, she sensed something else altogether, she assumed because it was closer in proximity.

“I…I think something’s watching us,” she warned, causing Casey to look around warily. “Come on. Let’s keep moving.”

The strong, urgent vibes didn’t make much sense, just like the way she *knew* everyone assumed Raph was okay. If they were back home, she could make a list a mile long of what might have happened to him. But out in the country…no potential threat could possibly know where they were and it’d been quiet for months. Absently, she wondered if she might be able to pick up on wildlife if it was agitated enough. Bears weren’t unheard of in upstate New York, even if she’d never seen one. It might explain why the woods were so quiet.

They continued their search and she still couldn’t pick up any sign of Raph. She told herself that she really didn’t know what she was doing and that her attempts were all guess work, but it didn’t make her feel any more at ease. Panicking wasn’t going to help the situation, but she was sure something was terribly wrong and didn’t know what the next course of action should be.

Suddenly, a scream cut through the quiet of the night.

“That’s Donnie!” she gasped and they both raced in the direction of his voice.

Glancing behind her, she saw that Casey was suddenly missing. “Casey? Casey! This isn’t funny!” she warned, but could hear the shake of her voice betray her fear as she spun around looking for him.

What she found instead was infinitely more terrifying than any bear. She instinctively took a step back from the creature in front of her, watching as it held Casey aloft by his head while he struggled to break free. But, just as quickly, she grounded herself, picked up the hockey stick that Casey had dropped, and leapt at the creature. The stick splintered as she cracked it over the creature's head.

Her attack didn’t seem to accomplish much more than freeing Casey from its grip. She sprung back and threw her tessen, her precise aim embedding the blade into its forehead.

It was only then, as the creature pulled the tessen out of its head and tossed it to the ground unphased, that she got a good look at it. Towering over her was something in the shape of a man, but appeared to be entirely made of some kind of plant life. It had some vague resemblance of a rudimentary face, two hollowed out eyes glowed an eerie green light at her. And if her mental gifts meant anything, she surmised it was mostly mindless beyond the instinctive need to survive; there would be no reasoning with it.

A vine wrapped around her legs, pulling her to the ground. Casey valiantly went on the assault, attempting to pound it into the ground with a baseball bat. April reached for her tessen and used it to cut herself free. She had no doubt that, while brave, Casey’s attempts were useless. If it was unphased by being sliced through the head, traditional methods were not going to be effective.

The creature tossed a now unconscious Casey to the side and stalked toward her. Attacking it, whatever *it* was, wasn’t going to work. Not knowing what else to do, she ran. If it followed her, she could at least lead it away from Casey, who was currently on the ground defenseless.

Her breathing came rapid and ragged as she dodged trees in what she knew was a very temporary solution. The creature was either going to catch up with her eventually or turn back to prey on the people she cared about. She fought the urge to look back to see if it was gaining on her, knowing it would only slow her down, and frantically tried to figure out another course of action as she stumbled out of the woods and into the clearing in front of the farmhouse.

She saw Leo and instinctively called out his name, momentarily forgetting his injuries until he started limping toward her. Another mysterious vine wrapped around her ankles and started working its way up her body. She desperately clawed at the ground as it pulled her back into the tree line. Then, everything went dark.

April was jolted awake by a swift kick in the back from Casey, to a cacophony of unfamiliar sights and sounds. She was having a hard time processing through it all, especially when she also had to contend with the mental ‘noise’ from everyone’s heightened emotional state.

She was in an unfamiliar shed, which indicated they were no longer on the farmhouse property. More importantly, they’d found Mikey and Donnie, who were both unfortunately strung up to the ceiling by vines.

She heard them screaming Raph’s name but the only sign of him she saw was his mask dropping from the creature’s hand. She frantically looked around, but didn’t see him anywhere.

Before she had time to process any of this or properly catch her bearings, Leo’s voice came in the distance.

“Leo,” Donnie murmured, matching her worry. He must have tried to follow her here, even in his condition. The creature left to find the source of the voice and they all continued in vain to break free from the vines.

She could hear a fight happening outside and feared the worse given Leo’s injuries. She fell over on her side, struggling against her restraints, when a low, alien wailing cut through the night indicating that Leo may have been more successful than she’d thought.

“Leo!” she exclaimed as he appeared limping through the doorframe.

“What the heck is that?” he asked, nodding to where Raph’s mask sat atop a mound of plant life.

“It's Raph,” Donnie answered. “Long story. Quick, get us out of here!”

She had no time to ask further questions or even contemplate what Donnie had just revealed, horrific as it was. No sooner than Leo had freed them, they could see the creature rise and stalk toward the shed once more.

They slammed the door shut and, in desperation, began reinforcing it with anything they could find and stood staring, ready. Instead, the creature opted to bust through the chained side door and, hampered from entering the rest of the way by the remains of the door and the chains, they attacked it simultaneously with everything they had. It was purely instinctual, an act to hopefully buy them time, as it had become clear that any attack would have little effect aside from slowing it down.

They beat on it with shovels and pitchforks, managing to even take an arm off, until it slumped over the bottom half of the door, still and dripping green goo. Then, suddenly, it awoke and tore the rest of the way into the shed.

April and Casey were thrown against the wall and slid to the floor. At a disadvantage, she was surprised when the creature didn’t continue its attack while it had the upper hand. She looked to see Leo holding up the bottle of medicine Donnie had created, which held the creature’s rapt attention. She wasn’t sure how it had gotten there or why the creature was

interested in the medication, aside from assuming it had something to do with the mutagen within, but all she had to understand in that moment was that the creature wanted it.

Leo tossed it across the shed and she caught it effortlessly, sprinting outside. She quickly threw it to Donnie and he began a game of keep away with Mikey, successfully distracting the creature.

“Casey, grab the chains!” April shouted, pointing to the set of chains laying on the ground of the shed. If they couldn’t beat it, maybe they could at least tie it down.

It had snared Mikey in vines once again and effortlessly plucked the bottle from his hand. Before it could do anything with its contents though, Leo sprinted at Donnie, who boosted him into the air. Using a pitchfork, Leo shattered the bottle and the force of his attack sent the creature sprawling at the base of a tree. Casey and April used the opportunity to quickly secure it to that same tree with the set of chains.

“That should hold him,” Donnie said, catching his breath. “Now, come on. We gotta get him back to the lab.”

“You really think you can save Raph?” Leo asked with concern.

“Honestly, I don't know, Leo. I just don't know.”

April had never heard Donnie sound so uncertain, holding the weariness of all they’d been through. His tendency to act as though he could figure anything out given the time and resources sometimes grated on her. It could be comforting, but other times she found herself wondering how much she could trust such assertions when he always made them so readily.

Right now, she would have preferred the comfort they provided. She hadn’t had time to process what happened to Raphael and, truth be told, she still didn’t understand it nor did any of this feel quite real.

Leo had returned to his crutch, unable to help the other three drag the creature by the chains restraining it. She turned back to the shed and picked up the red mask lying on the ground.

She caught up to the others, walking sadly next to Leo as she clutched the red fabric in her hand. She *knew* something had been wrong. Why hadn’t she trusted her feelings and acted sooner? It wasn’t fair! They had *just* gotten Leo back and not a day later this had to happen. The timing felt intentionally cruel, seeing as they’d had nothing but peace since arriving at the farmhouse. Until now.

“Hey,” Leo softly got her attention.

She hadn’t realized it, but she had apparently started crying. She tried to wipe her face for his benefit, but the fabric in her hand brushed against her cheek, reminiscent of when Raphael kissed her and she started crying all the harder.

Leo stopped her and she was grateful that the others were oblivious to her emotional state. The creature was immense and it was taking all of their focus and energy to pull it in the

direction they wanted, while it protested with a low guttural whining.

“Donnie’s going to fix this,” Leo promised, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“He doesn’t know if he can,” she sobbed.

“I did not wake up after a three month coma just to lose my brother,” Leo vowed.

He meant it, much like Donnie liked to reassure her without knowing for certain if he could deliver. But it wasn’t just for her benefit, he needed to believe it too, so she nodded and tried to compose herself. They continued side by side through the forest, dark as her thoughts.

Chapter 19

“You can hate me if you want! If I were you, I’d hate me too,” he muttered, practicing what he wanted to say to Donnie for the umpteenth time. He’d tried so many iterations of it at this point, but none of them worked. None of them made it okay.

They hadn’t needed the wood really, but the conversation inside was getting to him. Then again, so was everything else with confronting his brother weighing on him. Raph held the ax high above his head and tried yet again.

“Just…don’t hate me forever. We’re brothers,” he pleaded to the wood and swung down sharply, splitting the log clean in two. “Which is why I should have never fucking gotten myself involved with her,” he continued to himself, bitterly. “FUCK!” he shouted into the void that was the surrounding woods and tossed the ax to the side, its blade stuck into the soft earth.

While the future was always a nagging presence in the back of his mind, thinking about April and how this would all ultimately play out, he’d been mostly content ignoring it. In the past few days though, being forced to confront the reality of actually *facing* his brother, he realized one of the biggest reasons he was scared.

Donnie would *never* forgive him. He knew this because, if the roles had been reversed, *he’d* never be able to.

Raph sighed heavily, placed another log on the stand, and went to retrieve the ax. “Listen Don,” he tried again. “April really cares about you. We both do. We never meant-“

…

He opened his eyes, but everything was fuzzy and blurred.

“Oh no! Raph!” came Mikey’s voice. “Look at him! It's terrible!”

“What do you mean? He's perfectly normal,” Donnie replied, sounding tired, even for him.

His vision cleared as April’s face came into view and she was a welcome sight among the confusion. She bent over him, her delicate fingers tying his mask around his face. “How ‘bout now, Mikey?”

“Whew, yeah,” Mikey said, getting down into Raph’s face to look. “ *Way* better.” Raph shoved him off immediately.

“What… the heck is going on?” he groaned, trying to sit up on the bale of hay he was on, though how he’d gotten there he didn’t know. The last thing he remembered was chopping wood and then…had someone jumped him? If only he hadn’t been so distracted…or maybe he was becoming complacent with the length of time they’d been here.

“A crazy swamp monster sucked out your mutagen and turned you into a plant, dude,” Casey answered. “It was awesome!”

Raph looked at him like he had two heads, because none of that made the *slightest* bit of sense. Not to mention that he sounded *way* too hyped about a friend being attacked. But, to be fair, Raph knew Casey would act equally enthusiastic if something insane were to have happened to him.

“But I used this IV tube to drain all the mutagen out of the Creep and *back* into your body,” Donnie explained. “Cool, right? Killed off the infection like a bad case of shell acne.”

“Cool. Thanks, Don.” Donnie’s explanation meant the insanity that Casey described must be true. Given that, Raph knew he sounded way too nonchalant, but…. He didn’t remember any of it. How could you process a traumatic experience you *don’t* recall? Seeing how concerned April looked, he was prompted to let it go, at least for the time being.

“So, what happened to the monster?” Part of him hoped to hear that it still needed to be dealt with; he hadn’t had a proper scrape in months.

“It got turned back into swamp goo,” Casey said, nodding toward a jar of sludge. “Pretty wicked, right?”

He peered skeptically at the jar, having a hard time believing that the contents could have caused so much trouble.

April slid into a sitting position behind him, he could sense she wanted to do more, but couldn’t amongst mixed company. “Donnie worked all night to save you,” she said.

He looked down and away from the group with guilt. Of course Don had saved him; any of them would have done the same. But what he had to do, telling Donnie the truth, was hard enough without the universe making him feel even worse about it.

“Leo never left your side,” April stated and Raph turned to where Leo sat against the wall.

“That's what brothers are for,” Leo said, rising and limping toward him. Leo took him by the forearm and pulled him to his feet. “We gotta heal up, Raph. We have a city to take back.”

Raph smiled genuinely. He wasn’t sure what all had gone down, but Leo must have had a heavy hand in it, despite the handicap of his injuries. His voice was again infused with the confidence they were all accustomed to and Raph couldn’t help but be grateful that at least *something* positive came out of tonight.

It had taken *all* of her restraint not to embrace Raph when he was revived, but she’d already made enough of a scene in front of Leo without adding the others as well. Still, after everyone had immediately headed to bed, exhausted after the ordeal, she instead had the desperate urge to see him. Part of her thought it best to let him rest after what he’d been through, but the *other* part noted that he didn’t seem to have any major repercussions from

the possession. And, if something like that had happened to *her* , she'd be hurt if he didn't come check on her afterwards.

April snuck downstairs quietly, intending to knock on Raph's door, but found him sitting on the sofa in the dark. She didn't know if he was hoping she'd show or if he just couldn't think about turning in yet after finding out what happened to him. Or maybe he was thinking about Donnie, which had been preoccupying both their thoughts lately.

She took a seat beside him and spoke first.

"So, you don't remember *any* of it?" she asked, relieved to know that was the case, considering the experience must have been traumatic

"No," he replied, clearly torn between perturbed about and grateful for the missing piece of time. "…Did you see me…like that? Mikey tried to describe it, but I made him stop. It was too weird."

"No, it was dark and everything happened really fast," she assured him. "By the time I got there, it was just a matter of taking the thing down."

"…I guess, all's well that-," he stopped, seeing her start to break.

She hadn't wanted to cry in front of him, just wanted to check on him and let him know she cared, but it happened anyway. At least it wasn't the full on blubbering she'd done earlier that night with Leo.

He pulled her toward him and she laid her cheek against his plastron, a clear invitation to cry it out if she needed to, even as he softly insisted that he was alright.

A long silence hung between them as she calmed down and could sense he'd been affected more than he was trying to let on, which wasn't a surprise.

"You can talk to me about it if you want," she offered, her cheek still resting against his plastron and feeling him tense up. "I'm not prying," she promised. "If I was, I wouldn't have to ask."

"It's just…You're acting like I almost *died* ."

She wanted to tell him how it'd felt when he'd disappeared. How she had somehow known the moment it happened, this sudden quiet and empty feeling. How, for all intent and purposes, it felt as though he *had* suddenly passed away. But she wasn't sure she had the words to describe it and didn't want to freak him out anymore than she already was.

"Well, that's pretty accurate," she bluntly stated instead.

"Yeah, I guess so and the thing is…I'm not afraid to die. I mean, I've come close before, right? But I've always known it was coming. But this time…I didn't even *know* anything had happened to me, couldn't put up a fight, and that's…"

"Terrifying," April agreed.

He went silent again, too proud to admit having fears of his own, but smart enough to know she knew him better than that.

“I wonder if Leo knew beforehand, what was about to happen to him,” he mused.

“He hasn’t talked much about it,” she replied, just realizing how little Leo had shared of his experience when their world fell apart, even though the rest of them had been very forthcoming.

“He will, when he’s ready.”

Raphael opened the door to his room and crept out, hoping tonight wouldn’t turn out like *every* night the past week had. Finding Leo in front of the TV, he sighed deeply.

“You’ve had trouble sleeping lately,” Leo commented, making it clear that he knew Raph was there and he couldn’t just turn around and go back to bed.

“That’s something coming from you,” Raph replied, taking a seat.

It’d been the same every evening, his regular rendezvous with April being cut off by Leonardo’s presence. He understood why. His brother slept intermittently throughout the day, as per Don’s orders. It didn’t help that Leo was a notoriously light sleeper and *any* noise was bound to wake him.

The first time it happened had taken April and him by surprise and they’d practically flung themselves apart when they heard Leo approach. They said something about not realizing how late it was and he joined them for some terrible late night television. They’d been a touch more aware since, but it didn’t change the fact that he showed up night after night. Hell, tonight he’d beaten them both there.

“My sleep schedule is all out of whack. What’s your excuse?” Leo answered. “Or April’s for that matter?”

“What’s that supposed to-,” Raph began, but was interrupted.

“April,” Leo called behind him, as though he’d expected her, before Raph even realized she was there. “We were just talking about you. Will you be joining us again tonight?”

“N-no,” she stammered, having been taken off guard. “I was just a little thirsty.”

They silently stared at the glowing screen, listening to her quiet feet padding toward the kitchen, the light clinking of glass, the running faucet turning on and off.

“Goodnight,” Leo called after her as she made her way back to the stairs.

Raphael irritably pretended to watch whatever was on the screen, *seething* on the inside, but without any plausible way to express it and no way to explain where it was coming from.

“You two seem to have gotten close,” Leo commented after April had returned upstairs, sounding *forcefully* nonchalant to his ears…or maybe he was just paranoid.

“…It’s April. She’s one of the only friends we’ve got,” he threw back flippantly. “We’ve *been* close.”

“Fine. *Closer* then,” he returned, with that familiar exasperation his voice always carried when there was tension between the two of them.

“And that’s a *bad* thing?” Raph challenged.

“Why does everything have to be an argument with you?” Leo sighed, throwing up his hands. “I never said it was a bad thing! Just an observation. She was *really* upset with what happened to you last week.”

“…Why wouldn’t she be?”

His brother chose to ignore the comment and instead asked, “Did you know that she said she could *sense* you were in trouble?”

Raphael mulled this information over while trying to look unphased. Honestly, it wouldn’t have surprised him in the slightest if *he* , even while being actively possessed, had actually been aware that he was in trouble. Of course she’d sense that. But he hadn’t even known about it until after the fact.

Naturally he didn’t share any of this with his brother, offering instead, “Oh yeah, I guess you haven’t heard that her abilities are growing?”

“That…could come in handy,” Leo replied thoughtfully and Raph could already see the various scenarios being played out through his head as he tried to redirect his attention back to the television.

Using his room was risky, but when she showed up at his door, hair down and in her pajamas, he didn’t much care.

“Are you just going to stand there looking smug or are you going to let me in?” she whispered haughtily and he nodded her inside.

It had felt like an *eternity* since they’d had any proper alone time, having been interrupted by Donnie previously. He really didn’t want to just *assume* she’d be okay picking up where they had left off, but he also really didn’t want to risk missing out again. The same thing must have occurred to April, because it was only moments after the door shut that she took the initiative. He watched, entranced, as she lifted her shirt over her head, revealing peachy skin bathed in shadow.

Blazing hair escaped the confines of the collar and spilled around her face, the top was tossed to the side, and Raph didn’t hesitate to close the distance between them.

She was incredibly soft, more so than even he'd expected. He was all rough skin, hard shell, sculpted muscle and her softness contrasted him in the best possible way. He caught her mouth into a kiss, enjoying the pleased sighs she made when his calloused thumb brushed against delicate flesh. Hungry for her tells, Raphael was determined to catalog each movement that caused her catch of breath.

For several long minutes, they were enveloped in the taste and feel of each other, neither of them daring to move from their standing position and risk the old wood floor creaking. She let out a brief, hushed moan as his mouth traced down her neck to where his hands had been exploring, using his tongue to lavish attention on her breasts. Her small hands petting his head, fingers slowing momentarily each time he flicked his tongue just so.

His right hand was stroking the curve of her hip, holding her close. For a moment, he wondered if she'd let him grab her ass, but then her hips bucked forward from his attentions and his focus was pulled entirely to the waistband of her pajama shorts. Experimentally, he shifted his hand from her hip to her belly and slid two of his fingers down past the sunny yellow fabric.

"Whoa, slow down there big guy," she scolded, pushing away the offending hand. He groaned in frustration against her breasts, but accepted her pulling his face back to her level.

"I knew it," she chuckled quietly, giving him a brief peck on the lips. "I knew once I gave an inch, you'd try to take a mile."

"You're the one that started *all* of this," he pointed out teasingly, enjoying the view of her bare torso before she located where her thrown top had landed.

"And now I'm ending it," she insisted, matching his playful tone, then saying softly to herself "There it is!" and scooping her pajama top off the floor.

"You really don't have to go," he whispered, moving his hand to cup her cheek. She leaned into the touch and put her own tiny hand on his.

"It's not that I *want* to," she whispered back. "We had our fun. I just need to get to my bedroom before anyone catches me down here."

Raph took his hand back to himself and April slipped her shirt back over her head. He grunted in disappointment.

"You'll see them again, Raph," she chided, turning to leave.

Simultaneously, they heard footsteps heading toward the living room. April took an overly cautious step back from the door and neither of them moved eyes away from it for a good ten seconds.

"Leo's up again," she whispered, after they finally heard the faint buzz from the television.

"You could *sneak* upstairs," he teased. "I mean, what's all that training been for?"

"Against *Leo* ? He's like…hyper-aware *all* of the time."

“About that,” he paused cautiously, worried that he’d sound paranoid. “Is it just me or is he on to us?”

“I think that’s a bit of an overstatement, but he’s definitely on about *something* ,” April concurred. A large part of him would have preferred that she hadn’t agreed so quickly.

“I tried coming up to you last night, but he caught me on the stairs. I had to make up something about seeing if Mikey was awake for a round of video games.” Just *recounting* the event made him uncomfortable. “It’s weird, right? Out of everyone it being him, I mean.”

“I thought so at first too, but I’ve been thinking, our patterns of behavior have obviously changed since we got here. But Leo was *asleep* for all that. What was a gradual change for everyone else has *literally* happened overnight for him, of course he’d notice. Maybe neither of us showing up tonight will throw him off for a bit.”

“He also said something the other night about you sensing I was in trouble,” Raph revealed and April bowed her head self-consciously, nervously pulling at her fingers.

“It wasn’t that so much as… I didn’t sense anything. You were just suddenly *gone* .”

“Hey,” he soothed, grabbing one of her fidgety hands, knowing the tell meant she was upset. “It’s okay.”

“Is it?” she pleaded. “It means at some point I have just become *constantly* aware of you on a subconscious level. I told you that I wasn’t sure what us getting closer would mean, but-“

“Do you think I’m mad about it? Do I look mad? April, I’d probably be dead if not for you.”

“I’m just worried about accidentally invading your privacy…like…well, you remember,” her voice trailed off uncomfortably and Raph winced.

“I was an asshole for the way I reacted. I just didn’t understand. We’ll take this as it comes.”

“Thank you,” she sighed gratefully.

“It looks like you’re stuck with me for the night,” he smiled mischievously. “I’m going to set my alarm early and it’ll be *your* turn to jump out the window tomorrow morning.”

“Okay,” she sighed. “But none of this is going to get any better until you…y’know…”

“I know,” he grimaced. “I’m getting to it.”

“Sorry.” She gave him a peck on the cheek. “I know it’s a lot of pressure.”

When they both slipped into the bed, Raph grabbed an extra pillow, tucking it between the two of them as he wrapped his arm around her. Just to get a little…momentary distance. When they shared beds previously, April was *very* clear that it was snuggling and sleeping *only* , something Raph was determined to honor.

“Tell you what,” she said, turning her head slightly. “Since it clearly isn’t working *inside* the house, why don’t you wait until Donnie goes to bed tomorrow night and meet me out in the barn?”

“Hell yeah,” he agreed, kissing her goodnight and pulling her close.

The next night, Raph heard Donnie make his way upstairs and, after he was relatively certain that Don had settled down to sleep, carefully tip-toed past Leo’s room, making sure to gently shut the front door on his way out.

Once he arrived at the barn, he softly called out April’s name and scanned the shadows for movement, not wanting to risk turning on the lights and attracting attention. No answer returned from the darkness and he continued to move further inside.

Confronted by Donnie’s makeshift lab, Raph wished he hadn’t beaten her here. It occurred to him that it’d probably look creepy to anyone else: a variety of glass beakers, discarded circuit boards, and delicate tools shoved into the back of a barn. But it made Raph’s heart *heavy* . It seemed like all he did these days was think about his brother and fixate on how unforgivable his own choices have been.

The barn door was suddenly opened and he caught her silhouette in the beam of dim moonlight filtering through the crack. As so often was the case, his cares were washed away simply by her presence. She pulled the door shut behind her and sauntered towards Raph.

“Where were we?” she smirked at him, already lifting her sleep shirt off and tossing it over her shoulder.

“You are my *favorite* person,” he enthused, scooping April up playfully. She squealed with delight, no longer having to watch her volume. “And the barn might just be my new favorite place,” he added, in stark contrast to his earlier thoughts.

He sat on a pile of hay that rested in back and pulled her into his lap, kissing her deeply as his hand traced down her body. He found the clasp of her bra and his large fingers fumbled with it far longer than he would have liked, before giving up and pulling away from the kiss.

“Is this thing built to piss me off?” he bristled.

“You’re going to rip it,” she laughed, unclasping and tossing it to the side, quickly reaching for him again.

“Wait. Let me look at you first,” he breathed, taking in her form softly illuminated by the moonlight.

“Raph stop,” she blushed. “You’re staring.”

“ *Damn right* , I’m staring. Have I ever told you you’re beautiful?”

“Not in so many words,” she teased, clearly fighting back the bashfulness from her face.

“I don’t know why you put up with me,” he admitted, his hands gently sliding along her waist, slotting into her curves.

“Because you’re pretty good at this.” April replied, wrapping her arms around his neck and leaning in to kiss him once again. She gently maneuvered her center on the rough thickness of his thigh, letting out a small satisfied noise when the angle hit right.

This time around, she didn’t stop him from slipping his hands beneath her shorts and cupping her ass. But she did chuckle when his mouth went immediately after her bare chest.

“You’ve got a one track mind, but I guess I can’t complain.”

“Murakami’s,” April sighed wistfully.

“That’s a good one,” Raph agreed, nuzzling his face into her hair and liking the happy noise she made when he pressed a kiss to her head.

They’d been recounting the things that they missed most from home, something that should be akin to torture in their situation. But, looking down at her cuddled next to him on the haypile, still blessedly topless after their activities and apparently not in a hurry to redress herself, Raph knew he couldn’t possibly feel much more content than he did in that moment.

“It doesn’t help that I haven’t exactly turned out to be the best cook,” she confessed.

“Who told you that?” he demanded, ready to defend against anyone that dared to throw her an insult.

“ *I* told me that,” she giggled. “I eat it too, y’know.”

He laughed and attempted to reassure her. “It hasn’t been bad, just…”

“Bland,” she finished for him. “It doesn’t help that the selection out here is pretty slim pickings. Your turn. What’s something you miss?”

He mulled it over for a bit, before answering, “I haven’t been in a really good brawl in a long time.”

“Only *you* would miss getting kicked around,” she replied with a laugh.

“I’ll have you know,” he corrected her, playfully attacking the ticklish spot on her side with his hand, “ *I’m* the one that does the kicking around.”

Without warning, a sliver of light cut through the barn, and the silhouette of one of his brother’s clearly stood in the doorway.

“Donnie,” April squeaked, quieter than a whisper, and sunk into the stack of hay, concealing herself within.

Raphael hurried to his feet, thinking of an excuse why he'd be out here in the middle of the night… But realized that if any of his brothers *were* going to find a quiet place to be alone at strange hours, it'd be him. When the lights were turned on, he took to rounding up on a makeshift punching bag they'd hung from the rafters.

"Leo?" Raph called out, blinking against the sudden light and honestly surprised that it wasn't Donnie returning to his lab.

"What are you doing out here?" Leo asked, in what Raph thought was an accusatory tone.

"What's it look like?" Raph replied, striking the punching bag with a few quick hits.

"In the dark?" his brother continued skeptically.

"We playing twenty questions? What do you care?" Raph returned with annoyance, still attacking the punching bag. "Is this you trying to compensate for Splinter? If it is, I want to shut down that shit real quick."

Leo opted to ignore the comment, getting straight to the point instead. "And where's April?"

Raph paused then, stopping the swing of the bag with one hand. Inhaling sharply, he decided the sweet smell of hay that permeated the barn had to be hiding her scent. "Why are you asking me? I assume she's in bed."

"You have your faults, Raphael," Leo continued, undaunted. "But dishonesty isn't usually among them."

"You calling me a liar?" Raph's voice rose as he took a step toward him. Leonardo unsheathed a sword and Raph took the step back, unsure of how this escalated so quickly. But his brother's posture was non-aggressive and, instead of pointing the weapon at him, he swung his arm out wide and, with the tip of the blade, scooped up April's bra.

"I am," he said sternly, bringing his arm back around to point at Raph, the bra dangling by one strap in front of his face

Though his shame ran deep, he couldn't bear to show that to his brother and only continued to hold his gaze. Just then, an arm shot out from the haystack and April retrieved her bra from the end of the sword. Her arm disappeared back into the haystack just as quickly.

"We need to talk," his brother uttered darkly.

"Yeah," Raphael agreed. "Give us a minute."

Leo's eyes narrowed.

"Give us. A minute."

He watched as his brother limped back outside, before quickly retrieving a clearly shaken April, pulling stray pieces of straw out of hair.

“I’ve never been so embarrassed,” she muttered quietly.

He didn’t know what to say, so took to something more pragmatic: looking for where she’d tossed her shirt. April didn’t seem to know what to do with herself and stood there, frozen, until he handed her the missing clothing.

“Do you think he’ll tell Donnie?” she asked with clear concern, mechanically pulling the shirt over her head.

“I don’t know,” he answered frankly. “But don’t worry, just let me take care of this.”

April looked like she’d rather move into the barn permanently than walk past Leo after all this and he could hardly blame her. She took a deep breath and started walking toward the door, Raph stepping out first with her close behind. He had hoped she’d just ignore him and head straight for the house, but should have known better. It wasn’t like April to leave things unresolved if she could help it. When she turned to speak to him, he closed his eyes, wishing he could just make her read his mind not to bother, even though he knew it didn’t work that way.

April spoke first. “Leo, I-“

“You really should go to bed, April,” Leo cut her off, coldly. “And your shirt is on backwards.”

Raphael’s eyes shot open and he threw his brother a sharp look.

April’s eyes were wet with hurt and embarrassment. Raph’s hands balled into fists as he watched her solemnly head back to the house, while working her arms back into the shirt and shifting it around. As though it mattered.

When he was sure she was out of earshot, Raph turned on his brother. “You need to know, the only reason you’re still standing is because you’re *already* hurt and I don’t want to make it *worse* .”

“Don’t even try to take the moral high ground here,” Leo scoffed.

“Don’t make this about me,” Raph continued, undeterred. “Do you know how much you embarrassed her? It’s *April* , Leo. *April* .”

To his credit, Leonardo did look as though he was now considering that he maybe could have handled this differently. “…I’ll apologize to her tomorrow,” he conceded. “Now can we get to the topic of just *what the hell* you think you’re doing.”

Raph crossed his arms over his plastron defiantly. “It’s not anyone’s *damn business* what I’m doing.”

“Oh really? I think *Donnie* would disagree,” he said pointedly.

“ *Donnie* would be wrong,” Raph insisted.

Leo looked exasperated, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. “I need you to start acting like you understand the gravity of this situation because I *know* you do.”

He exhaled sharply, looking away from his brother; because he was right, as usual. “I’m *working* on it. The Donnie thing.”

“Just how long has this been going on anyway?”

Raph stood there silently.

“A couple of weeks?” Leo suggested.

He continued to just stare at him.

“A month?” Leo asked, his voice edging back into frustration.

Raph clicked his tongue.

“Two months?!” Leo exclaimed, mouth agape.

Raph wondered if he understood the meaning of “not his business”, but knew his brother thought *everything* was his business.

“The whole time?!” Leo shouted in disbelief.

“I didn’t write the date down in my diary,” he finally responded, sarcastically.

“And *this* has been you ‘working on it’ ?,” his brother demanded. “For *months* ?!”

“April didn’t think it was a good idea to stir things up right away,” he replied.

“Who *cares* what April thinks?!” Leo snapped.

“I DO!” Raph thundered back.

There was a long pause between them, neither giving an inch as was so often the case between them. Leo broke the silence first.

“Let me tell you what I’m *not* going to let happen, Raphael,” Leo began darkly. “We’ve already lost sensei and I’m *not* going to allow you to tear this family apart when it’s at its most vulnerable. Honestly Raph, I’m down for the count and *this* is what you and April decide to do? How *selfish* can you be?”

Raphael punched him square on the jaw. It was unexpected, after he’d just conceded to not wanting to hurt him further, and sent Leo to the ground.

His brother bitterly spit out some blood. “What happened to ‘not wanting to hurt me worse’,” he asked, with an accusatory tone.

“Your *mouth* seems to be working *fine* ,” Raph barked. “And while we’re *explaining* things, let me tell you what *I* won’t let happen. I’m *not* going to listen to someone who’s been

unconscious for the past three months tell me *fuck all* about a period of time he doesn't know *shit* about. You weren't here, Leo. You weren't here to see us lose Splinter. You weren't here to see us lose the city. You weren't here to see us cope with all that loss. And you sure as *fuck* weren't here to see April holding us all together."

"Cope, huh? You have an *interesting* coping mechanism."

"Funny. Real funny," Raph threw back. "As much as you want to get on your high horse about it, it's a lot healthier than my previous 'coping mechanisms'."

His brother had a hard time coming up with a clever retort to that. Raph offered him his hand. Leo looked up at him and accepted it, Raph pulling him to his feet once more.

"I need to know what you're going to do to fix this," Leo insisted and Raph nodded.

"I'm going to talk to Donnie. It's just been… *difficult* to find the right time."

Leo looked skeptical. "I'm going to be honest with you, Raph. I don't know if a talk is going to fix much of anything."

Raph fell silent again. Hearing someone else utter his own fears out loud made them all the more potent.

"You need to think about what's best for this family," Leo finished, limping back toward the house.

Raphael wasn't in any rush to follow him, haunted by his final words and wondering how true they might be.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!